







They were entering the door-yard where a cowboy advanced to take their ponies.

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(*"Virginia's Ranch Neighbors."*)

VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS

By GRACE MAY NORTH

AUTHOR OF

"Virginia of V. M. Ranch," "Virginia at Vine Haven,"
"Virginia's Adventure Club," "Virginia's
Romance."



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THE
VIRGINIA DAVIS SERIES

A SERIES OF STORIES FOR GIRLS OF TWELVE
TO SIXTEEN YEARS OF AGE

By GRACE MAY NORTH

VIRGINIA OF V. M. RANCH

VIRGINIA AT VINE HAVEN

VIRGINIA'S ADVENTURE CLUB

VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS

VIRGINIA'S ROMANCE

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VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS

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VIRGINIA'S RANCH NEIGHBORS

CHAPTER I.

HOME ONCE MORE.

"OH Virg, are we really to arrive at your desert home this morning?" Betsy Clossen exclaimed the first moment that she opened her eyes on the fifth day after their departure from the Vine Haven Boarding School.

"Not until nearly noon," Virginia, who was dressing in the lower berth, smiled up at the eager face that peered down from the upper.

"And will your nice brother Malcolm be there to meet us, do you suppose?"

"I certainly hope so. I wired him from Chicago that we were to be on this train. If he can't come himself, for any reason, he will surely send Lucky over with the car."

"That's one disillusioning thing about the desert," Betsy continued. "I'm powerfully sorry that you have an automobile. It's heaps too modern. I wish we were to be met with a—well a prairie schooner or something like that."

Virg laughed. "I'm afraid you are going to be disappointed in us, Betsy. You'll find V. M. really quite tame if you have been reading Wild West stories." Then Margaret said quietly to her berth companion, "I do wish something exciting would happen the moment we arrive, don't you, Virg?"

The older girl smiled but shook her sunny head. "No need to wish for that these days, dear. Life in Arizona is not nearly as thrilling as it is in the city of New York, if one can believe the newspapers."

"Don't tell Betsy, for if she thinks it is to be too commonplace, it will take all the thrill of expectancy out of it for her. You know she is never really enjoying herself unless there is a mystery to unravel or some adventure awaiting her."

Fifteen minutes later the four girls were in the dining car.

Betsy beamed on her companions. The early morning sun falling on her red-brown hair made it shine like burnished gold.

"Even your freckles look gilded this morning," Barbara teased.

The pug nose of the youngest wrinkled at her tormentor, then with an excited little squeal she exclaimed, "Oh, isn't the desert just gloriously lonesome looking? Those mountains over there are so bleak and gray and the canons so dark! I can't see a living thing anywhere, can you?"

Margaret, being questioned, peered out at the wide sandy waste of desert stretching to the distant mountains that rose grim, gray and forbidding. Here and there a clump of gresewood or of mesquite was half buried in mounds of sand that the frequent whirlwinds had left.

Betsy shivered. "Girls," she said solemnly, "the very scene teems with mystery. I just feel sure that an exciting adventure is about to begin at most any moment. The setting is perfect for one. I'm going to watch that sandhill over there as long as it's in sight. I expect to see a Mexican bandit peer around it and utter a shrill cry which will mean—"

"Do the young ladies wish oatmeal this morning?" It was the suave waiter who had interrupted, and although the girls gave their orders with solemn faces, they laughed merrily when they were again alone.

"It's too bad to disappoint you, Betsy, but that's about the way all of your hoped-for adventures will end," Virginia told her friend.

The four girls, Virginia Davis, the seventeen-year-old mistress of V. M. Ranch and her adopted sister, Margaret Selover, who was sixteen, their neighbor, Barbara Blair Wentz, also sixteen, and Virginia's guest, Betsy Clossen, who as yet was but fifteen, had traveled from Vine Haven, where they had been attending boarding school for the past year.

Although the other three girls were well acquainted with the Arizona desert, Betsy Clossen had never been west of Chicago. However, she had often frequented that big city, as she had many others in the east, for her father was a famous detective who was often following clues that led him from Chicago to New York, and, at first, not wanting to be parted from his motherless little girl, he had taken her with him, but at last, believing that he was doing the child an injustice, he had placed her in the Vine Haven boarding school, where she had since remained, making friends of all whom she met. The years she had spent as her father's close companion had given her an insight into the ways of unravel-

ing mysteries and the game had fascinated her adventure-loving nature.

To the great amusement of the girls she was always trying to imagine a mystery that she might solve it, but in the past year she had twice failed while two of her comrades who had no such ambition had been successful, and so, no wonder was it that Betsy looked forward to the desert as a place where she would surely find a mystery to solve.

Virginia, who had been born on the V. M. Ranch, which was twenty miles from the town of Douglas, and who had lived there all her seventeen years, was indeed overjoyed because she was returning to the home she so loved, to her very dear brother Malcolm Davis and to old Uncle Tex, who, when he was younger, had been the foreman of V. M.

The father of Barbara Wente had recently purchased the Dartley Ranch which was four miles north of V. M. This he had given to his son Peyton. Barbara had learned that the old house was interesting, but she had never seen it as, with the other girls, she had left almost at once after the deal had been completed, for the school in the east.

"What do you think, Virg?" Babs chattered as the four girls with their hats on and their bags ready, sat peering ahead, "Peyton wrote in his very

last letter that he hasn't even opened the old ranch house yet. He is leaving it for us to do."

"I adore old houses," Betsy began, when Virginia exclaimed as she pointed out the windows. "See that dark hole in the mountain just ahead of us?" The others leaned forward to look.

"Oh, good!" Margaret exclaimed. "It's the last tunnel, and Silver Creek station is just beyond." Megsy turned toward her adopted sister, a flushed eagerness betraying the excitement she felt. "Just think, Virg, in ten minutes we are to see Malcolm."

Betsy uttered a little excited squeal as the train plunged into the darkness of the tunnel.

"Virg, isn't this a thrilling moment," Barbara whispered, "not being sure who is to be at the other end?"

Sunlight again flashed into the car windows. Virginia stooped and looked out. "There's the little old station that's the only house for miles and miles around, but I don't see anyone on the platform except the old man who lives there. Wonder what has happened?"

Mr. Wells, the Silver Creek station master, hurried forward when he saw that the limited was slowing down. It never stopped unless it had passengers. When the four girls alighted, the tallest

placed her bags on the platform and went toward the weather-tanned middle aged man with hands outstretched. "Oh, Mr. Wells," she exclaimed, and her voice betrayed her anxiety, "why isn't my brother here to meet me, or Uncle Tex or one of the boys? I sent them a telegram. Didn't you get it?"

The small boy, Davie, who had a front tooth missing, had come running up from somewhere. "Yes'm, Miss Virginia," he said breathlessly, "I took the telegram over to V. M. two days ago jest as soon as Pa give it to me. Mis' Mahoy was all the folks I could find. The men was out riding the range. She said they seemed to be huntin' for something. She didn't know what, but they acted mighty puzzlin'. Uncle Tex, though, he was 'spected back that night or the next."

The girls had gathered around, listening, when suddenly the boy, who felt very important, as he was the center of attention, suddenly leaped across the platform and looked toward the north. "Pa," he shouted, "see that dust cloud a-comin'? D'y 'spose it's a stampede or suthin'? D'y 'spose—"

"I do believe it's our automobile." Virginia shaded her eyes to gaze through the dazzling sunshine. It was indeed, but it was approaching in

such a zig-zag manner that even Mr. Wells was puzzled.

"I reckon the fellar at the steerin' gear is plumb beat out. I figger that thar car's sort o' runnin' itself," he speculated.

The watchers were convinced that this was true for as the cloud of sand cleared away, they could see the big seven passenger car that belonged to the V. M. Ranch, but the driver was neither Lucky nor Malcolm.

"It can't be Uncle Tex, for he doesn't know how to drive," Virginia had just said, when Margaret exclaimed, "But it is Uncle Tex, and he certainly doesn't know how to drive. Oh, Virg, did you see the lunge he took just then? I do believe he is going right over the tracks and down into the dry creek instead of coming this way."

"Mighty-tighty!" The station master's favorite expletive expressed his consternation. "Cain't nuthin' be done to head him off? I dunno a tarnel thing about them pesky iron-bronchos."

Virginia had caught one glance of the driver's face as the front wheel had struck a hummock of sand, causing the car to swerve. If it should cross the tracks, it would plunge over the steep bank and

crash down among the huge rocks on the bed of the dry creek.

Leaping from the platform Virginia shouted, "Uncle Tex, stop the car!"

Luckily it had slowed considerably since the sand, through which it was ploughing, was deep and soft. Virginia sprang upon the running board, leaned over and shut off the gas.

"Uncle Tex," she cried, "why did you risk your life that way?" The old man removed his sombrero and was mopping his brow. "I dunno, Miss Virginia, dearie, I foresee, now, I orter not have done it, but it allays looked plumb easy, and when thar wan't no one else to come an' meet yo' all, I jest figgered as I'd take a chance."

The girl got in the car and skillfully brought it alongside the platform. Then, leaping out, she began stowing the bags in back, while Margaret and Babs welcomed the old man, who found, when he tried to stand that his knees were "plumb beat out." Betsy was introduced, then Virginia asked, "Why didn't Malcolm come?"

Uncle Tex looked quickly around to be sure that Mr. Wells was out of hearing, then he said softly, "I cain't be tellin' ye, least-wise, not here, Miss Virginia, dearie. Malcolm said, 'Keep it dark.'"

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He's all right, though. You needn't be fearin' as to that."

Betsy had heard enough of this conversation to be tingling with curiosity and excitement. It certainly did sound to her as though there was both mystery and adventure awaiting them, nor was she wrong.

CHAPTER II.

HUNTING THE SURPRISE.

WITH Virginia at the wheel, the seven passenger car kept on the well-beaten road that extended from the Silver Creek Junction to the V. M. Ranch.

Uncle Tex sat beside the girl whom he so loved and the three on the rear seat often sent smiling glances, one to another, as they noticed his pride in his "gal's" skillful driving.

"Seems powerful pleasin' to have yo-all back, Miss Virginia dearie," the old man said as the car began the ascent of the mesa road.

The girl at the wheel flashed him a bright smile. "Oh, but it's good to be home. I can hardly wait to reach the top of the trail." Then glancing back over her shoulder, she called "Betsy, in just another moment you are to behold the nicest spot on earth, or, at least, it is to me." Then chancing to recall something, she inquired "Uncle Tex, I'm just ever so curious to know what the surprise is that you have for me. May I have three guesses?"

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She and Malcolm as children had always had three guesses whenever the old man had brought them a treasure from out on the range. Then, when they had guessed, they searched through his many pockets to find it. The weather-tanned face wrinkled in an amused smile. "I reckon 'twould take more'n three guesses, Miss Virginia this time, I reckon 'twould, an' even then, 'twon't be found in my pocket nowise."

"Oho, that's a hint. It's something big!" Then over her shoulder. "Girls, help guess. Megsy, you and Babs have lived with me at V. M., so you might perhaps, think what Uncle Tex has planned for my surprise."

"Maybe it's a new hen-corral," Margaret suggested. "I remember one twilight last year when I went out to get the eggs, and found a coyote in the hen house, Uncle Tex said the very first thing he was going to do after we left was to build stronger fences."

The pleased grin on the old man's face was evident even to the girls on the back seat. "Ah was messin' round fixin' that fence long fore yo-all's train hit the big city, I reckon, but that guess missed the heifer, so coil yer rope and throw again."

Betsy chuckled. She was delighted with the old man, not only because he was such an interesting character but also because he was lovable.

"Hm' let me see!" Babs pretended to think hard. "I recall now that Virginia wished she had a pond near the wind mill so that she might keep ducks."

"Oh, but Uncle Tex wrote me that he had made a duck pond for me just as soon as spring rains were over, so that can't be it."

The old man's head was shaking. "Yo-all ain't teched it yet," he was saying, when Virg uttered a little cry of joy. "Look ahead, Betsy, quick, if you want to get the very first glimpse of V. M."

The little maid on the back seat stood up and peered between the two in front as the car reached the edge of the plateau nearest the ranch.

There in the valley was the big rambling low-built adobe house, beyond it were the bunk houses, the hen yard, the wrangling corral, the pens for the cattle that needed temporary sheltering, the small adobe house nearer the dry creek bottom in which lived the Mahoys, and towering above them all was the huge red windmill, the great wings of which were slowly turning in the gentle breeze that was blowing from the west.

While the little stranger's glance roamed from

one of these buildings to another, Virginia's violet eyes were eagerly searching the trails leading to the ranch, hoping that on one of them she might see her brother returning from the mysterious errand about which Uncle Tex had hinted and the nature of which as yet she did not know. There was no one in sight. Not wishing her companions to know how truly anxious she was, Virg stopped the car and turned with a bright smile to exclaim: "Girls, welcome to my home."

Betsy was charmed with the inside of the ranch house as she had been with the out. The great living room, with its wide fireplace on which a mesquite root burned slowly, suggested cosy evenings spent around it.

The long library table scattered over with books and magazines, the student lamp with its wide warm-colored shade, many comfortable arm chairs, a piano and its companioning music box, bear skin rugs on floor and wall, and pictures framed by the windows, of desert, sand hill and distant mountains, furnished the most home-like room that little Betsy had ever seen.

"I'm going to just love it here," she said, then to tease, she merrily added, "if you can provide me with a mystery."

Virginia laughed. "Girls," she turned to the other two," since we three are hostesses, and it is our aim to please, let's make up a mystery, but there, I musn't tell Betsy what it is to be. In fact I haven't thought it out yet. But come, let's take our bags to our rooms for Uncle Tex is waiting to show us the surprise."

The two large, sun-flooded bedrooms were next each other with a door opening between.

Margaret and Virginia were to share the room which Virg had occupied since her childhood, while Babs and Betsy were to have the other for their very own.

"I can hardly wait until our trunks come," Babs prattled. "I am just wild to see myself in my new cow-girl costume."

"You looked at yourself times enough in the school mirror," Megsy said to tease.

"Perhaps, but the setting wasn't right. It will look quite different out here where the mesquite bushes grow," Babs retorted.

"I came so unexpected like," Betsy deplored. "I didn't have time to buy me a khaki outfit, so what shall I do. I don't want to look like a tenderfoot."

"As though you could help it, whatever you wore!" Babs began, on mischief-bent, but Virg

solaced. "I'll loan you one of mine that I have outgrown. You won't have to buy one just for the month that you are with us." But the little maid declared eagerly, "Oh yes, I will, Virg, if there is a place to buy it. I'd love to wear it at my aunt's summer home in the east and make the boys envious."

Uncle Tex was seen coming slowly up from the garage, and Virg knew that he was eager to show them what he had planned as a surprise.

Catching Betsy and Babs by the hand and nodding a merry invitation to Margaret, Virg led the way out of the wide front doors, but, before she had gone many steps from the veranda, a big shaggy creature hurled itself at her from the trail leading from the cabin of the Mahoys.

"Goodness!" Betsy cried in alarm, "Is it a desert wolf or a coyote?" She needed no answer, for the creature, wagging itself for joy sprang upon its beloved mistress and uttered queer little yelps of delight.

"Shags is plumb nigh as pleased to see yo-all, Miss Virginia dearie, seems like, as yo' old Uncle Tex was, though I reckon, he cain't be, quite."

A glance in the direction from which the dog had come revealed the Mahoy family awaiting in

front of their small adobe house to share in the welcome, so, excusing herself, Virg ran down the trail, Shags at her heels barking his glee. Mrs. Mahoy had a new baby in her arms and Virginia beckoned the other girls to come and see it.

"Ain't she nice though?" It was Patsy, now aged ten, who looked about at the group of girls who were eagerly peering into a flannel bundle to find the wee bit baby. Virginia glowed. "Uncle Tex," she cried turning toward the old man who had ambled after them. "I do believe this little baby is the surprise that you said we would find on V. M. Ranch."

"Wall, I reckon 'twas one of 'em," he confessed, "but thar's another, Miss Virginia, dearie. Spose yo-all scatter now and see who'll be furst to find it."

Then away the girls ran. Margaret led them to the hen-house, so eager was she to be sure that the fences were coyote-proof. They were indeed, for the wire fence extended so far underground that none of the desert creatures would take the time to burrow beneath it so near a residence of the enemy man. Too there was a roof of wire netting over the small yard, which protected the feathered brood from any of the vulturous birds of prey.

"That certainly is improvement number one,"

Virginia cried in delight. "Many a time I have been heart-broken entirely because some of my little new chicks have been carried away by pirate birds." They were leaving, when Megsy caught Virg's arm as she squealed gleefully, "I do believe that I've discovered the surprise. Hark! Don't you hear a faint peeping somewhere?"

Virginia listened and then, noting that their escort's grin was broadening, if that were possible, she exclaimed, "Oh Uncle Tex, are there really some baby chicks? Where are they? Please show them to us?"

The chicken yard gate was opened and the old man led them to the sunny side of the hen house where, from between the bars of a barrel coop, the yellow head of an anxious mother protruded as she clucked a warning to fifteen balls of fluff that ran to her, tumbling on the way and piping their fright.

"Oh, the dear little things! Please let them stay a moment, Biddy Mother," Margaret implored. "I want to hold just one."

The one that was lifted ever so tenderly, begged so pitifully to be set free, that Megsy put it down close to the coop and smiled to watch it scud for the shelter of its mother's wings.

"Lucky little puff-ball!" Betsy said with a note

of sadness in her usually merry voice. "What wouldn't I give to have a mother to run to." Uncle Tex, who had remained outside, happened to call just then. "Better be hurryin', Miss Virginia dearie. Pears like its mos' lunch time as yo-all names it."

Virginia glanced at her wrist watch. "True enough," she exclaimed "and now that I am home, Uncle Tex, you are to have a long vacation from the kitchen. We girls will do all the cooking and brewing and mopping and scrubbing and—" but the old man, shaking his head, interrupted—

"Wall, I reckon yo-all won't have time to do much playin' if yer scheming that-a-way."

All unconsciously Virginia sighed. How she did wish that the faithful Chinaman, who had been cook in her home since she was a baby, had not, the year before, decided to revisit the land of his birth. He had slipped away without giving notice, (although he had told them months before that he was going, sometime), and he had never returned.

As they crossed the descending trail that led to the towering red windmill, Virg glanced at the old man, and silently renewed her resolve to relieve him of much of the kitchen work, which had been his self-assumed task. They had tried Mexican

cooks, Malcolm had written her, but Uncle Tex had fretted through the brief stay of each one, and had at last declared that he didn't want any more "cholos" messin' round Miss Virginia's kitchen, "spatterin' it up," and that he'd take "keer" of it fer her himself, but Virg knew how, during those long months of faithful service, his big heart had yearned for the freedom of the range. "I'll show him how much I appreciate what he has done to make the home pleasant for my brother while I was gone," the girl had just decided when a cry from Betsy and Babs, who had skipped on ahead attracted her attention. They were standing near the windmill beckoning excitedly. "I do believe they have found the surprise," Virg confided to Margaret, then she glanced inquiringly at the old man, but his beaming expression revealed nothing.

A moment later the something was revealed.

"Oh Uncle Tex, how pretty! Did you make that all alone and for me? Virginia's delight was indeed real and she was convinced, as were the other girls, that at last they had found the surprise about which Uncle Tex had written. Beyond the windmill and in the warm shelter of its wide walls stood a little garden house over which a blossoming vine was growing. Within was a table and

four comfortable chairs that had been entirely made of yucca stalks and had been skillfully fashioned with infinite patience by the leathery, wrinkled hands of the old cattleman.

The garden house itself was made of yucca, the stalks being so long and strong that Virginia knew, to procure them, the old man had to visit a distant part of the desert where they grew.

Just below the door of this summer house was the pond of which Uncle Tex had written, and on it several ducks were lazily swimming.

"There's water enough for a garden, Miss Virginia dearie, but Ah reckon'd as yo-all'd want to set out the sort of flowers yo'd like best." Then, as Virginia had not spoken, he asked, almost wistfully. "Yo-all likes it, don't yo', Miss Virginia dearie?"

There were tears in the violet eyes that turned toward him. "Like it! Oh, Uncle Tex!" Her arms were about him and her soft young cheek was pressed close to his leathery one. "I was just hoping mother might know. She used so often to wish since there are no shade trees near that we might have a cool, sheltered out-of-doors place where we could take our books and sewing."

Then, fearing that the tender-hearted old man

would regret not having thought to make such a summer house in the long ago, she exclaimed merrily, "This very day at four, we will serve afternoon tea, and you, Uncle Tex, shall be the guest of honor." Then, giving the again smiling old man a sudden bear hug, she whispered in his ear, "You dear, I'm going to think up the nicest kind of a surprise and spring it on you—some day."

"When's your birthday, Uncle Tex?" It was Margaret who asked. The old man looked truly startled. "Me? Why, Ah's plumb forgot. Sorto seems like it comes in the summer, though." He had removed his sombrero and was scratching one ear meditatively. He seemed actually to be trying to recall a forgotten date.

"I'll tell you what," Babs sang out, "let's pick out a day before Betsy goes home and give Uncle Tex a surprise party."

"It won't be much of a surprise, since you are telling him about it," Margaret began, but Barbara declared that it would be, since he wouldn't know, until he received the invitation, which day had been chosen.

They were walking toward the house as they chatted. Virginia and the old man lingered back of the others. Margaret had made this possible,

for she felt sure that her adopted sister was anxious about Malcolm's prolonged absence, and, for that matter, she was herself, and surely she had a right to be, since she was his ward.

Virg had often glanced at the trails that led one of them toward the sand hills, another toward Seven Peak Range, and a third toward Puffed Snake Water Hole, but on none of them did horsemen appear.

"Uncle Tex," she said softly as she slipped a detaining arm in that of her companion, "can't you tell me why Malcolm is away at this time? It must be something of a very serious nature to keep him from home when he knew that I would be arriving this week."

There was a shade of anxiety on the face of the old man. "'Tis, Miss Virginia dearie. Leastwise, Ah reckon 'tis. It all happened hurried like. Lucky came ridin' in 'long 'bout sundown two nights ago. 'Ah've hit the trail sure sartin,' was all Ah heard him say. Then Malcolm buckled on his gun belt. 'Keep it dark which way we ride,' he says to me, then they was gone. Ah was plumb puzzled and Ah sure am still, but on certain thought Malcolm'd be comin' back by now or sendin' word, knowin' as yo-all was 'spected."

"Well, I'll not worry," the girl said wisely. "Malcolm never runs into trouble needlessly." Then, as they had overtaken the others, Virginia called as gaily as she could, that her guests need not know of her anxiety. "Who wants to be helper in the kitchen this noon? I'm going thither to be chief cook."

"Oh, can't we all help?" Margaret hurried to inquire. Then she nudged Virg and nodded toward the old man who (trying to keep behind them) was making frantic motions towards a kitchen window. When Virginia turned, he attempted to assume such an innocent expression that the girls were even more puzzled.

Virg pretending not to have seen his gestures, caught his hardened hand as she leaped up on the veranda, calling, "Uncle Tex, you come too, and be my advisor. It's so long since I have cooked, maybe I have forgotten how."

Virginia felt sure that another of the old man's surprises awaited her in the kitchen, nor was she wrong.

CHAPTER III.

MALCOLM'S RETURN.

It was four in the afternoon and the girls, having had a long siesta after their lunch, had donned their muslin dresses (for the station master had arrived soon after noon with their trunks), and, taking Barbara's cherished tea set, without which she never traveled, they had hied them to the summer house. Virg gathered a few of the scarlet blossoms that grew wild after the rains. Nearly all of them dried up but one clump had remained to welcome the girls. These she placed on the yucca table. Margaret was carrying a plate of small cakes. Betsy had a tray on which were five cups and saucers and tiny spoons. Babs, at the end of the line, held the fragile pot of delicate blue which was brimming with weak but hot tea.

Virg stood back to admire the table when it was set. Then laughingly she exclaimed: "I just can't get over it. I never was more surprised in all my

life. When I opened the kitchen door and saw that dear old Sing Long fussing around the stove, as though he weren't expecting us, I just had to rush up and hug him."

"Whizzle, but you certainly took the wind out of my sails, as Cousin Bob says," Betsy declared, "I've always been scared of Chinamen and to see you actually embracing one! I dunno as I'll ever recover from the shock."

"I don't believe there's a kinder, nobler, more faithful race of people on this earth," Margaret championed, "and Sing Long is just like home folks to Virginia, isn't he Virg?"

The shining-eyed girl nodded. "He surely is. Why, Betsy, Sing was here before mother came as a bride. I'm so glad he wanted to come back. I wouldn't have Uncle Tex know it, not for worlds, but I was rather dreading the responsibility of cooking for so many people, and now we won't have anything to do, but plan—"

"Mysteries," Betsy cut in. Then she asked: "Virg, I may be slow as a detective, but I certainly do think the way you keep looking in first one direction and then another is most mysterious."

The young hostess sat down in one of the comfortable yucca chairs. "Have you noticed it?" she

inquired, "Well, then, I'll explain. I'm not really worried, but I'll confess I am puzzled."

She then told the other three girls all that Uncle Tex knew of her brother's sudden departure two nights before.

Megsy smiled and nodded toward the little stranger-to-the-desert, for, with a brow supposedly wrinkled in deep thought, she sat gazing across the shining stretch of sand toward the mountains.

"What do you make of it, Mistress Detective?" Babs asked merrily.

"I don't," was the frank answer. "Virg, what do you?"

"Well," the oldest girl replied, "since Lucky rode in, after nightfall, in such haste and told brother that he was sure he had hit the trail, I conclude that there had been a—"

"Oh, do you think it was a holdup, or something like that?" This from the eager Betsy.

"No, I don't. I think a mountain lion may have been killing the young calves and that Lucky and Slim have been trying to trail it."

"How disappointing! I'm not at all interested in solving a mystery which has only a mountain lion in the leading part."

Babs teased. "I'll say you aren't. You wouldn't

want to start on any clues that would lead you to a lion's den."

"Girls," Virg suddenly exclaimed, "our guest of honor has forgotten to come. There he goes riding along the creek bottom, so we'll have to drink the tea, for, if we don't, it will soon be cold."

"Oh dear, that is too bad! It's piping hot now and this pot holds six cups. Can't we find another guest of honor to—"

"Lookee! Lookee!" Betsy had leaped to her feet and was pointing toward the trail that led from the sandhills.

Two horsemen were approaching at a gallop, and Virginia cried, "Oh, how I hope one of them is Brother Malcolm."

"Then the mystery will be solved," Betsy exclaimed joyfully.

As the horsemen neared, Virg and Margaret ran out of the summer house and waved their handkerchiefs for they were no longer in doubt as to the identity of the newcomers.

There was an answering shout of joy from the one in the lead and Malcolm leaped from his horse and ran toward them waving his sombrero. The older cowboy led the ponies to the corral.

"O brother, brother," Virginia's welcome was at

once laughing and tearful, as she was caught in the lad's strong arms. "I'm glad, glad I went away just for the joy of knowing what home means. Not that I didn't always love it here, but Oh, brother, you can't guess how many wakeful hours I had just hungering to hear your voice, and now, if you'll let me I'm going to stay right here for ever and ever and ever."

The giant of a lad laughed happily as he turned to greet his ward, who, with flushed cheeks and a wistful light in her tender brown eyes, was waiting near until the brother and sister had welcomed each other. Then Babs came and Betsy was introduced. "This is our would-be young detective," Virg said merrily. "She declares that the desert is an ideal setting for a mystery and so we girls are going to make up one and let her solve it."

"You won't have to invent one," Malcolm declared as he dropped into the yucca chair toward which his sister had led him. "Lucky and I have been awake two days and nights trying to solve one that is very real. Slim is working on it, too, but he has a Mexican boy with him and they have ridden toward Sonora."

"Oh Mr. Davis!" Betsy leaned forward eagerly. "What are the clews? Do tell us."

But Virginia said: "Not until brother has had some refreshment." Then to Malcolm: "I don't suppose you've had a thing to eat this noon."

"Righto, and for that matter Lucky and I had very little for breakfast. We had no idea that we would find ourselves on a blind trail," the lad began; then ended with:

"So a cup of tea will do well for a starter." He accepted the delicate blue cup that Barbara handed him with an amused smile.

Lucky was approaching shyly, sombrero in hand. Virginia, chancing to see him, stepped out of the summer house and beckoned to him.

His awkward bow when he was introduced would have amused Betsy at another time, but just then her entire thought was given to the mystery about which she was soon to hear.

"No, ma'am, thanks." Lucky twirled his hat and shifted from one foot to the other when Barbara offered him one of the eggshell china cups. "Ah jest wanted to say howdy to yo-all." He was visibly embarrassed. Then with a nod toward the house he added, "Sing said frijoli all hottee."

Malcolm rose. "Young ladies," he addressed them all, "if you will permit us to satisfy our inner crav-

ings, I'll promise within the hour to tell you all the clews we have been able to discover."

Lucky had gone on ahead and Virginia, linking her arm in that of her brother, walked with him toward the house.

"Can't you give me an inkling of an idea as to what it is all about? Is it anything we girls can help solve?"

The lad was at once serious. "No, sister. You girls are better off here at home with Uncle Tex, but we'll report progress each time we return."

Virginia looked troubled. "Oh brother, are you going away again? Surely not today."

"Not until morning," he replied. "We'll both be better fit after a good night's sleep." Then at the kitchen porch, she left him and walked slowly back to the summer house. The three girls eagerly awaited her.

"Did Malcolm tell you the clews?" Of course this was from Betsy. "Why, no." Virginia declared. "I was so concerned about my brother that I forgot to ask him where he had been or why." Then Margaret had an inspiration.

"It's after five by my little wrist watch and so I suggest that we put away the tea things and have our supper of nice frijolies and bread in the kitchen with

the boys. They can tell us the clews while we're eating, for I am sure they will want to tumble into bed as soon as they can."

Virginia looked at her other guests to see if the plan met with their approval. She was not long left in doubt. "Oh, goodie, I'd love to have supper with a real cowboy. My Cousin Bob will be green with envy when I write him about it." Betsy was gathering up the spoons as she spoke. Soon the little procession approached the house.

Malcolm saw them coming and smiled. "I tell you, Lucky, it seems mighty nice to see that sister of mine once more. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I hope she won't want to go away again."

Lucky, having finished his supper, rose as the girls entered the long kitchen that was flooded with the late afternoon sun.

The middle aged cowboy spoke apologetically: "Miss Virginia, if yo-all will excuse me, Ah'll turn in. Ah reckon Ah cain't keep awake, an' Malcolm here and me's figgerin' on hittin' the trail again come sunup."

When he was gone, Sing Long served the girls to heaping plates of steaming frijolies, generous slices of cornbread and tumblers brimming with creamy milk. This fare greatly delighted Betsy for it was

very different from that to which she was accustomed.

Malcolm told Sing Long that he, too, might go, as they no longer needed him. When they were alone, the giant of a lad smiled about at the girls, who were eagerly awaiting the beginning of his story.

"Now," Virginia said when the door closed behind the Chinaman, "what happened first?"

"We heard about it last Monday," Malcolm began, "Lucky and I were loping slowly along down near the station. We were on the outlook for strays when we saw little Davie Wells riding toward his home from the direction of the Three Sand Hills as though a stampede of cattle was about to overtake him."

"‘What’s up with the kid, d’ye reckon,’ Lucky asked me, and I replied, ‘By the way he keeps looking back over his shoulder, you’d think he was being pursued, but I don’t see anything chasing him.’"

"When the lad was near enough for us to see his face, we knew, without his telling us, that he was very much excited about something.

"‘Hi-o! Davie, has there been a train robbery?’ I shouted when he was near enough to hear. He evidently had not seen us, but upon hearing my voice, he wheeled his pony and galloped toward us. I repeated my question.

“ ‘Nope,’ he replied breathlessly. ‘Leastwise there ain’t been one yet, but Pa says sure as a cactus ain’t a mesquite thar’ll be a robbery in these here parts afore sunup tomorrow, Pa says it’s sure sartin.’ ”

“Of course we were interested. We never knew our respected station master to prophesy anything but that it came to pass with almost uncanny accuracy, so Lucky and I drew rein and listened to what the little fellow had to tell, but when we had heard him out, all we could make of it was that a queer kind of caravan had been seen leaving Douglas early that morning headed toward Silver Creek. Davie thought maybe there were half a dozen covered wagons and a dozen mules and dogs, but he wasn’t certain. The cowboy who’d seen the outfit hadn’t stopped to count them.

“ ‘Gypsies, I reckon,’ was Lucky’s conclusion, and if so, kid, your pa’s right. Thar’ll be some stealin’ ’fore sunup sure sartin.’ Then he looked at me with a puzzled expression as he said, ‘Malcolm, I never heard tell of gypsies trailin’ across the desert hereabouts, have you now?’ ”

“I agreed that I had not, but the lad’s description seemed to fit and so we let it go at that.

“ ‘Wall, I must be off.’ Davie seemed suddenly to remember his former haste but I detained him

long enough to ask, 'Where are you going in such a hurry?'

" 'Over to Slater's to warn 'em 'bout that robbery as Pa says it's sure sartin.'

"Davie's little wild pony needed no urging and a second later all we could see of him was a racing sand cloud. I laughed, but Lucky seemed to take the matter more seriously. 'What do you make of it?' I asked when I had let him study on the matter in silence for several moments.

" 'Ah jest don't,' he replied. 'Ah cain't figure no-how why a caravan of gypsies 'd start across this here trackless part of the desert.'

" 'It isn't as trackless as it used to be,' I reminded him, 'for now that all the ranchers own automobiles there's a makeshift sort of a road from one place to the next.'

" 'Mebbe so, but Ah cain't figger out why gypsies would go to all the trouble of draggin that there caravan o' theirs through the sand jest to be robbin' ranches. They couldn't make fast enough time to get away with it. More'n likely, if they was gypsies, they-all thought as how this might be a short cut to some place up north where they're bound for.'

"I agreed that Lucky's version was probably the correct one, and, as we saw no evidence of the

reported caravan in our neighborhood, I doubtless would never have thought of them again if it hadn't been for something which happened that very night."

Malcolm paused and the girls, having ceased eating to listen, leaned forward with renewed interest.

"Oh, brother, what happened? Please don't stop there."

The lad smiled. "I only stopped to take a breath. That is permissible, isn't it?"

"Oh-ee! I'm so excited." Betsy's flushed cheeks and glowing eyes were evidence that what she said was true. "Did the gypsy caravan come?"

"Was the station master's prophecy correct?" Maragaret asked.

"Were we robbed?" Virginia inquired anxiously.

Malcolm rose. "Let's go in by the fire," he said. "Sing Long wants to clean the table." The Chinaman had been opening the door from his room every few moments to see if the young people were through. Following Malcolm's suggestion the girls led the way into the big living room. The lad put a dry mesquite root on the coals and then sat down in his favorite grandfather chair. "Yes, indeed, something of an unusual nature happened that night and this is what it was:"

CHAPTER IV.

MALCOLM'S STORY.

WHEN the girls were seated about the fireplace, they turned eagerly to the narrator of the tale which had been interrupted by their moving from the kitchen to the living-room.

"Let me see," the lad was purposely tantalizing, "where did I end the first chapter?" Then, before he could be prompted, he continued: "Oh, yes; I remember.

"After Davie Wells had left us, Lucky suggested that we ride over to the Three Sand Hills. He wanted to climb to the top of the highest one and take observations, so to speak, of the entire surrounding country. It's a hard climb, because of the sliding stones and sand, but we made it and held to the giant yucca up there, while, with shaded eyes we looked in every direction. It was an unusually clear day and every object stood out as though it were magnified, but not a sign of a gypsy wagon did we see. Lucky did make out a sand

cloud way to the north, but it wasn't large enough to hold a caravan. Lucky believed it to be made by a small herd of cattle trailing toward Puffed Snake Water Hole.

"It was dusk when we entered the ranch house, and Sing Long was the only person at home. He had been baking all the afternoon in the kitchen, and had neither seen nor heard anyone passing. We did not tell him that we had been informed that a gypsy caravan, made up of at least six covered wagons, had been seen leaving Douglas and heading our way. We had decided that there really was nothing in the report, and Sing Long was inclined to be imaginative.

"After supper Lucky and I sat for a time in front of the fireplace. I was reading, and, though Lucky held a newspaper and stared at it as though he were deeply engrossed in some item of Douglas news, he was evidently thinking all the time of what we had heard that afternoon. His first remark proved this.

"Suddenly he sat up very straight and seemed to be listening. 'Did you hear it?' he asked. 'A sort of a rattling noise?'

"I put down my book and listened. I heard nothing and I told him so. 'That is nothing, except the bellowing of the prize yearlings that we

had driven into the corral the day before.' It did seem as though they were making more noise than they had during the day.

" 'Wall, I reckon that's only natural,' Lucky tried to reassure himself by sayin'. 'They're restless, them young steers air, being shet in arter allays havin' had the freedom of the range.' He returned to his newspaper and I to my book, but before many minutes I was conscious of the fact that my companion was again listening intently. I laughed. 'Lucky,' I remonstrated, 'aren't you imaginative tonight? Surely you are not expecting a visit from Davie's Gypsy caravan, are you? That would be utterly impossible, since only two hours ago you saw for yourself, when we were on the top of Yucca Hill, that there was nothing of the kind for many miles around.'

" 'Wall, I call'ate Ah am sort of skeerful. Truth is Ah never did like them Gypsy folk. Ran into 'em once when Ah was a little shaver, down in Texas, and Ah've given 'em a wide berth ever since.' Then he rose, saying, as he yawned and stretched: 'Wall, sort o' guess Ah'll turn in. Ah reckon Slim's back from the border, or soon will be. Ah'll take one more look at the corral an' see if them gates are still barred.'

“‘All right, Lucky. S’long.’ Then I couldn’t resist teasing. ‘But don’t stay awake all night listening for tambourines.’

“After he was gone, I became so interested in my book that I sat up much later than usual. When I did decide to turn in, I first of all stepped out on the front porch and looked around.

“The bunk house was dark and there wasn’t a light anywhere on the desert. I was sure that if Gypsies were camped nearby they would have a night fire to protect them from wild animals and keep away insects.

“The prize yearlings in the corral were quieter, although every now and then one would start a restless lowing which would awaken a few others. Then a moment later, all would be silent.

“They’re safe enough I thought as I turned in and went to bed.

“I didn’t awaken until dawn, and then it was to slowly come to the consciousness that someone was pounding on my door. I can’t remember when I had ever locked it before.

“‘Who’s there?’ I called, leaping half dazed from bed.

“It was Lucky who answered, and, in his voice I sensed tragedy.

"‘It’s me, Malcolm! The prize yearlings! They’re plumb gone!’

"Of course I was into my clothes before I was hardly awake, nor did I fully grasp the meaning of what I had heard until I had flung open the door and had beheld Lucky’s face, white in spite of the tan which has been deepening there for the past forty years. One glance at him and I knew that I had heard aright.

"‘What do you make of it?’ we were swinging down the trail toward the corral when I asked the question.

"‘Gypsies, of course,’ was his laconic reply.

"‘It doesn’t seem possible nor reasonable.’ I was not convinced, but, of course, if the prize yearlings were really gone, someone had taken them unless — ‘Lucky,’ I said, ‘are you sure they didn’t break through the fence somewhere?’

"‘Ah thought of that, but the tarnel thing is jest as whole as ’twas when Slim got through mendin’ it only Saturday week.’

"Just then we reached the drop in the trail and I could see the corral. Lucky had spoken truly; not a rail was misplaced, and, although the gate was standing open and torn from its hinges, it was

evident that it had been broken by the impact of the stampeding cattle.

"I stood and stared almost stunned and hardly able to believe, even then, that so tragic a disaster had come to us. 'Lucky,' I said, 'are you sure you barred the gate? The yearlings couldn't get through there any more than through another part of the fence if it were equally secure.'

"I saw at once that my companion was hurt.

"I was sorry that I had asked the question, and I told him so. 'Lucky,' I said, with my hand on his shoulder, 'there's no one on the entire desert more trustworthy than you are. Of course the cattle got out some other way.'

"'An' the way was them gypsies.' Lucky doggedly kept to his preconceived theory that a band of thieving gypsies were sure to rob us that night.

"It didn't seem possible to me, nor probable either, but I didn't tell him so.

"What I did say was. 'Let's get a snack to eat. climb Yucca Hill once more and see if there is any trace of the herd.' Of course it would be impossible for gypsies to drive them very far in the few hours between midnight, when I turned in, and early dawn.

"But Lucky seemed determined to believe the

worst. 'Not if they were headed for the border,' he replied. 'They'd be across 'afore sunup easy.'

"I knew that to be true but decided to take an observation from the highest of the Three Sand Hills as soon as possible. Leaving our horses at the bottom we began the ascent. I had the misfortune when half way up to step on an insecure rock, which loosened and sent me sliding to the desert again. Lucky had kept right on and soon reached the top. I heard him shouting as he gestured excitedly. 'What do you see?' I called, feeling convinced that it was something which had interested him, nor was I wrong.

" 'It's a tarnel whopper of a sand cloud and 't isn't Mexico way, neither, so we can take hope from that.'

"I had scrambled to his side by that time and stood shading my eyes from the glare of the rising sun. I, too, could see the rapidly moving cloud of sand.

" 'What do you make of it?' I asked.

" 'Ah reckon it's our yearlings all right on a stampede. But what's puzzlin' me is how a caravan on wheels that's pulled by mules, as Davie said 'twas, kin go 'long fast enough to keep up with 'em.'

" 'It couldn't,' I replied, 'but a bunch of rustlers on bronchos could keep up without half trying.'

"I was heart sick, Virg, at the thought that some clever cattle thieves had made away with our prize stock. The distance that they had already traveled, if they were our yearlings, was so great I could have no hope of overtaking them. There was one thing that puzzled me. That rapidly moving cloud of sand was headed directly for the part of our desert that is called Burning Acres. Not a ranch nor a water hole for miles and miles and sure death awaits man, horse or cattle if they get stranded in that barren waste.

"I was deeply discouraged. However, as we descended the hill I said: 'Lucky, it's a lost hope I guess, but the most we can do is to pack enough grub to last a few days, take two extra mounts, all the canteens we can carry and head that way.'

"That's what we did, which brings the story up to the hour of our departure."

"Did you find any trace of our yearlings?" Virginia's query was anxious, for she knew that herd had been the pride of her brother's heart. The lad shook his head. "No," he said, "we didn't. We rode as far into the Burning Acres as we dared go. When our water supply was half gone, we turned back, knowing that we would need an equal amount on our return trip. We had ridden in silence for

some time when Lucky said: 'Malcolm, Ah don't hold that notion about gypsies any more. Ah reckon the thieves was rustlers that knew their business. Ah figger the fellow that told that yarn to Davie was stringin' him. Thar wan't any wheeled caravan in these parts, of that Ah'm sure sartin.'

"I was glad that he had come around to my way of thinking, but just as we were leaving the Burning Acres, I saw Lucky, who was in the lead, leap from his horse and examine the sand. Then turning, he gestured, beckoning me to hurry."

Malcolm paused. "What had he found?" Betsy asked. She was sitting so close to the edge of her chair that she seemed in danger of falling off.

"Well, when I reached the spot," Malcolm knew that what he was going to tell would astonish his hearers, "I saw Lucky pointing triumphantly at what were unmistakable wheel tracks in the sand."

"Brother, do you really think that a band of gypsies has ridden into those dreadful dry lands?"

"I don't know, Virg. We couldn't stop to investigate as we were out of water and so we returned to V. M. As it was noon, we ate the good dinner Sing had ready for us and I turned in for an hour's sleep but Lucky could not rest, and so

after having had not more than forty winks of a doze, I heard him again riding away in search of further evidence.

"It was nearly dusk when he returned and he came on a gallop shouting my name. I was out on the porch in a moment. 'Ah think Ah've hit a trail sure sartin this time,' he called. I saw that he was leading my horse and a fresh mount that was laden with supplies.

"Uncle Tex rode in just then and seemed surprised to see that we were starting out so near nightfall. He had been to his cabin on Second Peak for several days and so had heard nothing of what had happened. I didn't wait to explain, but must have mystified him greatly by calling, 'Keep it dark which way we ride.' "

Virginia nodded for the old man had told her that he was indeed puzzled. "What did you find, brother?" she eagerly inquired.

"The same wagon tracks a mile to the west of where we had seen them before, but we could only find them in sheltered places. Of course in the open they were quickly covered with the drifting sand. We hunted for two days and all we found was this."

He drew a scarlet silk scarf with fringed edges

from his leather coat pocket. "That's rather conclusive evidence that Lucky is right, isn't it?" his sister inquired. "Shouldn't you say that a gypsy woman might have used that scarf as a head covering?"

"I don't know much about gypsies," the lad replied, and the tale being told, he leaned back wearily.

It was the quiet Margaret who noticed how truly tired her guardian looked. "You've been overworking, Malcolm," she said solicitously. "It has been a terrible strain for you to keep awake day and night with all the worry about the lost yearlings."

The lad smiled down at her as he rose. "I think we'll have to change places, Mistress Margaret," he said. "I'll be the ward and you the guardian since you look after me so well." The sweet face of the girl was flushed, but, as Betsy had at that moment twisted the scarlet scarf about her own head, no one noticed Megsy.

When Malcolm was gone, the merry maid skipped lightly about on her toes shaking an imaginary tambourine.

"Betsy, you make a very fine gypsy," Babs said, then, noting that Virginia sat, quietly gazing at the fire as though she were deep in thought, Barbara

rested a hand on her arm as she added, "Virg, this means a good deal of a loss, doesn't it, to you and Malcolm?"

The young hostess nodded, "Yes, dear, it does, but I am more concerned about Malcolm's anxiety than I am about the disappearance of the yearlings. I do wish there was something that girls could do to help."

Betsy had drawn near to listen. "Let's get up just as soon as ever we can awaken," she suggested, "and let's try to find the wagon trails. If only I could solve this mystery, I'd be the happiest girl in all the land."

Virginia, who understood the desert better than did her companions, even those who had visited it the year before, hesitated. Well she knew that it was very easy for even one desert-bred, to be lost in the Burning Acres. Then, noticing how truly disappointed Betsy looked, the young hostess conceded. "We can ride as far as the Three Sand Hills if you wish." And with this Betsy had to be content, but how she did hope that they would go farther, and, Oh, if only she, Betsy Clossen, could find the caravan trail and restore the missing cattle. Her active brain was planning imaginary clues long after the others were asleep and yet, she was the

first to awaken as soon as a faint grey light revealed the horizon. What would the day bring forth, she wondered.

CHAPTER V.

BETSY'S FIRST RIDE.

MALCOLM, weary indeed with the long hard riding on the three days previous, did not waken, nor did Uncle Tex when, at a very early hour, the four girls stole out of the ranch house and, while the stars were still shining in the paling sky they skipped down to the wrangling corral. In a nearby shelter hung the saddles and Virg, with Margaret's help, soon had the four ponies ready to ride. If Malcolm had known of their expedition, he would have insisted upon accompanying them, not knowing what dangers might await them. In fact he had intended to warn Virginia not to leave the immediate neighborhood of the ranch until he and Lucky had discovered the hiding place of the mysterious caravan, but, although he thought of it after he had retired, he reminded himself that it would be time to tell them at breakfast.

Virginia indeed had little hope of coming upon

the trail of the rumored caravan, for, during the night, a sandstorm had swept across the desert and though of but brief duration, it would have obliterated whatever tracks had been visible the day before. She had thought of explaining this to the girls, but, knowing that Betsy would be greatly disappointed, she decided to ride with them at least as far as the Three Sand Hills.

This she often did, and, as the hills were surrounded by a vast waste of open desert, she knew that unless the gypsies were camped on the other side of the hills themselves, they would not come unexpectedly upon them.

Betsy, before she had left school, had expected to be timid about riding the western horses but Virg chose for her a gentle pony that was well broken and so interested was the Eastern girl in the quest upon which they were starting, that she found that she was not at all afraid.

The east was beginning to glow with pale rose and lilac when the top of the mesa was reached and Virginia, in the lead, pointed, as they all drew rein, to the Three Sand Hills that loomed dark and isolated, standing alone like sentinels on an otherwise flat expanse of desert.

Betsy looked up with glowing eyes. "It's won-

derful!" she said, "just to see this sun rise on the desert is worth a great deal, even if we don't find a trail."

Then they started on again riding single file. Betsy's pony had taken the lead which delighted the young rider.

"It's going to be a glorious day," Margaret smiled back at Virg. "If it weren't for the lost yearlings and the anxiety it means to you and Malcolm, I would be Oh, just ever so happy to think that we are home again."

Virginia was pleased to hear her adopted sister call the desert "home."

"Dear," she said, "I am not going to worry over the loss nor will Malcolm. Being unhappy and making others unhappy never restores the thing that is lost. I mean to try to forget it as soon as we are sure that the herd cannot be recovered."

For a moment they rode on in silence, then Megsy looked back again and smilingly nodded toward Betsy, who, quite forgetting that she intended to be afraid of Western horses, was leaning far over in her saddle and gazing at the sand that had been ribbed and scalloped by the wind during the night. Suddenly she stopped her pony to await the others.

"Virg," she asked eagerly, "are we near the place where Lucky first saw the wagon trail?"

Virginia had to confess that they were yet many miles from the edge of the Burning Acres where that trail had been seen. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Betsy," she said, "but it would be impossible for us to ride that far unless we were prepared for a hard journey and were accompanied by Malcolm or Uncle Tex."

They paused at the foot of the group of hills and Betsy shuddered as she said, "I don't know why they seem so uncanny to me. Did anything ever happen here, Virg, anything spooky?"

"Why, nothing that I know about." The Western girl laughed at the eager expression on the face of their youngest. "What, for instance?"

"Oh, some famous bandit might have been captured and bound to that giant yucca that stands all alone on the highest hill, and the masked men who had captured him might have stood down here and shot him, then silently ridden away while the vultures came with their weird cries to—"

Megsy put her hands over her ears. "Betsy," she remonstrated, "you're telling the story of that moving picture we saw at Vine Haven. My, but it was gruesome!"

Betsy laughed mischievously but Virg said seriously, "Those popular pictures give a very wrong impression of our desert life, as it really is. Now, if the rest of you would like to climb to the top of Yucca Hill, I'll stay here with the ponies. It might be hard to catch them if they strayed in search of grass, and I do want to get home before Malcolm can miss us and be worried."

Betsy was scrambling down from the back of her patient mount as she replied, "I'm going to climb up there, and stand right where the bandit stood—and—"

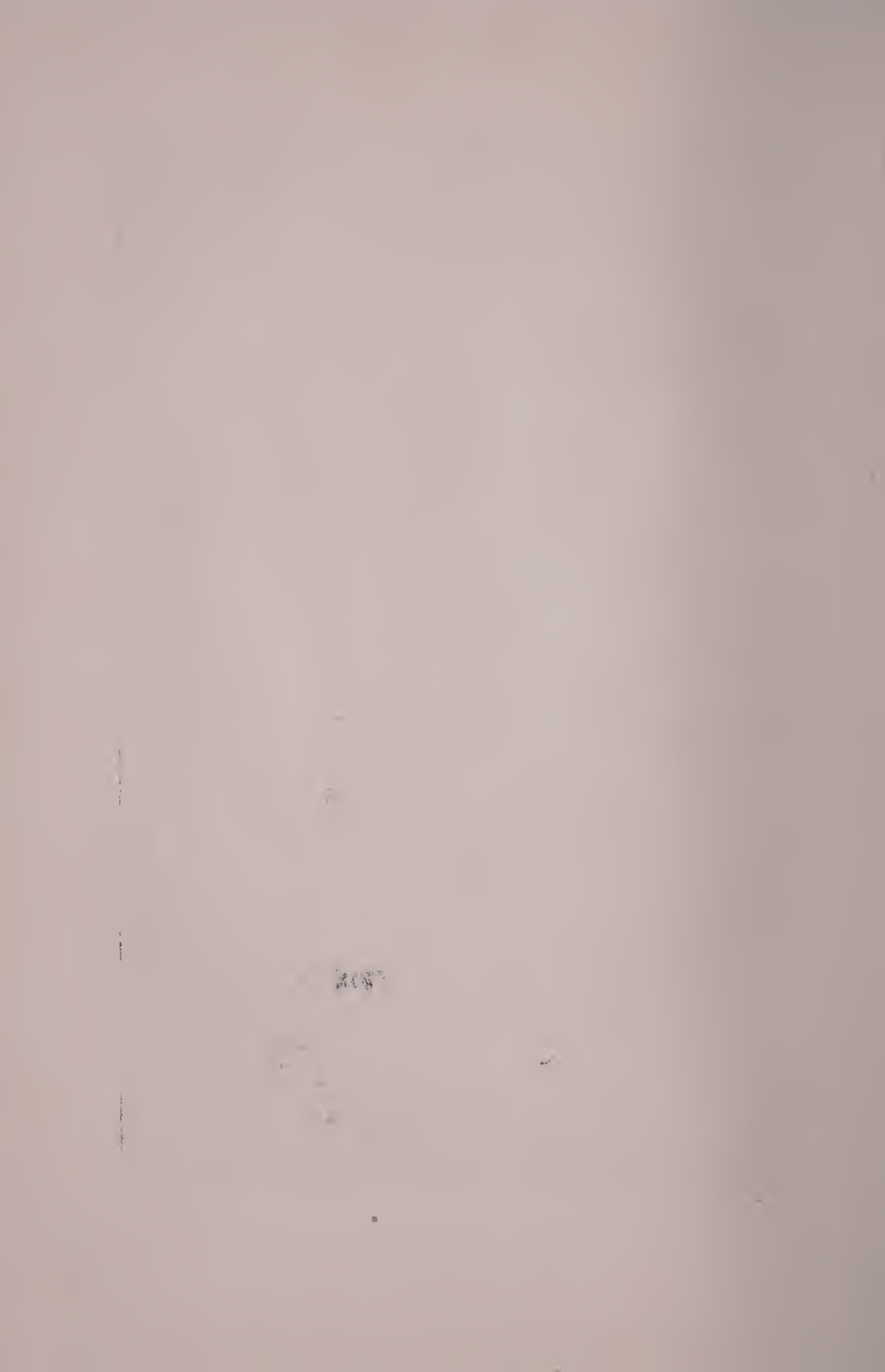
"Well, go on then." It was Barbara who spoke. "We'll wait for you down here. I, for one, am not pining for such a hard climb before breakfast."

"Do you dare me?" the twinkling eyed Betsy, asked, her arms akimbo.

"Double dare!" Babs retorted. Then they all laughed to see the speed with which Betsy began the ascent, but she soon found that she slipped back about as far as she progressed. However, in time, she reached the top and holding to the giant yucca she waved her other hand to the watching group. Then, shading her eyes, she looked long and intently in the direction of the Burning Acres. Suddenly she began to beckon wildly. Virginia was



"It seems to be all wings, and it's white, isn't it?"
(Page 57) ("Virginia's Ranch Neighbors.")



puzzled. "I wonder if she is doing that to tease or if she has really seen something of interest."

Virg was the first to climb to the top of Yucca Hill, Margaret having offered to remain with the four ponies. Barbara, breathless, reached them a moment later, in time to hear an excited Betsy exclaim, as she pointed toward the south, "Virg did you ever see a bird as big as that? It seemes to be all wings, and it's white, isn't it?"

Babs protested. "Goodness Betsy. Did you call us way up here and in such a hurry just to show us a bird?"

But Virginia, whose eyes were keener, since she was used to desert distances, watched the wide-winged object which was high in the air, and at least half a mile away.

"If it is a bird, which I doubt, it has hurt one of its wings for surely it is not flying in—" she interrupted herself to exclaim: "Oh, I see now! there goes one of the little whirlwinds that scud over the desert so often. Whatever that flying thing is, it was evidently tossed high in the air and is fluttering back to earth."

Virg had surmised correctly for, with awkward movements of apparently wide stretched wings, the something, which had so aroused Betsy's curiosity,

fluttered groundward, but before it touched the sand it caught on the arm of a formidable thorny cactus which stood near the mesa trail. Laughingly the girls descended and told the curious Margaret what Betsy's excitement had been over.

"And there I had hoped that it might be a clew," that maiden mourned, as again, single file, they rode back toward V. M.

"Not a wagon track have we found nor anything exciting or even interesting," Babs began, when Virg, being in the lead, called over her shoulder as she pointed at the great cactus that appeared near the trail not far ahead:

"There's your wide-winged bird, Betsy. Nothing but a newspaper that tried to soar for a time but failed."

Since they were in a hurry to reach V. M. before the hour which Malcolm had suggested that they have breakfast together, the girls did not stop to examine the newspaper, but, when they had reached the ranch yard, Betsy, who had been unusually quiet during the downward ride, suddenly exclaimed:

"Girls, I'm not sure but that we missed a clew, after all, when we passed that newspaper. If you don't mind, Virg, I'm going back and get it. How-

ever," and she smiled in a mischievous way, "if it's all the same to everybody, I guess I'd rather walk. It's ages since I've been on horseback, and I'm getting powerfully stiff."

"If you'll wait until after breakfast I'll go back with you," Babs told her friend.

"Can't be done, old dear," Betsy declared. "Another whirlwind might come along and where would my newspaper be?"

"Well, do hurry. I can tell by a certain appetizing fragrance on the air that ham and eggs are being prepared, and Oh! but I'm hungry."

Betsy acknowledged that she herself was most starved, but added that if Babs had the real detective instinct which she possessed, mere eating would not even be considered when there might be a clue to be had for just a little effort.

The three girls, having turned their unsaddled ponies into the corral, walked arm in arm up to the house. Their youngest had already started on a run toward the mesa trail.

"It's at least a quarter of a mile back to that cactus," Virginia said, "so we needn't expect Betsy for quite a while."

But to their surprise, ten minutes later, as they were emerging from their rooms, having changed

their khaki riding habits for gingham morning dresses, they heard a familiar voice shouting without. Then the front door burst open and a most excited Betsy waved torn fragments of an old newspaper as she cried: "It's a clew, it is a clew; just listen to this."

CHAPTER VI.

BETSY'S FIND.

THE girls gathered about Betsy Clossen to gaze eagerly at the torn fragments of newspaper when that excited little maid burst into the ranch living room announcing that she really had found a clew.

"Where is it? I can't see anything but plain print," Babs chattered.

"How did you get back so soon? Virg inquired. "You couldn't possibly have climbed the mesa trail. You've only been gone ten minutes and that would have taken you half an hour."

Betsy laughed. "I had an ally in another whirl wind. I hadn't gone far when I saw torn fragments of the same newspaper that had been caught on the cactus scudding toward me. Then a gust of wind blew sand in my eyes and I had to turn my back. I was afraid that I had lost the flying pieces, but luckily they had caught on a mesquite bush right at my feet. I pounced on them and on the very top I found written—"

Betsy was holding the pieces back of her and just to tease she asked, "Guess what!"

"Oh Betsy, how provoking you are, must we guess?" Babs pondered a moment then said, "Maybe it was something in the Romany tongue. That is what they call the gypsies' language, isn't it?"

But the would-be young detective shook her head and looked inquiringly at Margaret. "Oh, I never could guess, can you Virg?"

"Hm-m! Let me see. It might be a note scribbled by somebody on the Burning Acres, who was trying to send a message to tell that he is stranded and in need of aid."

"I don't think that is it." Betsy brought the paper around and held it up that all might see. Then she pointed at some very fine writing on an upper margin. "If it were intended for someone else to read, it would be larger and clearer."

"What does it say?" Margaret inquired. But Betsy could not tell. "Why, I thought you told us that you were sure that it is a clue to the whereabouts of the gypsy caravan or of the stolen yearlings."

Betsy was about to defend her theory when Virginia, who had taken the paper to the window that she might better see the very fine writing, exclaimed:

"It seems to be a memorandum of some kind. I can read several words, but altogether they make but little sense. They are 'five miles beyond.' I can't make out beyond what, then comes 'turn toward mountains,' after that the pencil marks are blurred until the last sentence, which is, 'likely to make a find there.' "

Betsy whirled toward Margaret, glowing, triumphant. "There now, Mistress Doubter, isn't that a clew and a fine one?"

"Well," the other maid replied rather reluctantly. "It might be, and yet again it might be merely a paper that some mining prospector was reading when a whirl-wind came along. What you read, Virg, would be just about what a miner would jot down, don't you think?"

The Western girl nodded. "Yes, dear, I believe so. Wait until I get the magnifying glass and perhaps the blurred part will be clearer."

While Virg had gone in search of it, Malcolm appeared calling, "Ready for breakfast girls?" Then seeing their excited expressions, he inquired: "What's up?" Betsy's words fairly tumbled out in her eagerness to be the one to relate the story of her find. The lad took the fragment and looked at it intently. "It wasn't written by the type of pros-

pector who usually climbs over these mountains with pick and shovel hunting for copper. In fact most of them can hardly write at all," was the lad's decision.

Virg at that moment appeared, and holding up the magnifying glass, she exclaimed, "Now perhaps we will find out the secret hidden in that blurred writing."

Even Malcolm believed that Betsy might have found a clew and they all bent over the fragment of newspaper which Virginia had spread on a table near the window. After several moments of intent scrutiny, he told the girls what he believed was the meaning of the very fine and frequently blurred hand writing.

Betsy was elated.

"Whizzle," she exclaimed excitedly, "it is a clew after all. A whale of a clew!"

"Brother, read it again and then tell us what you make of it." Virginia urged.

So once more Malcolm placed the magnifying glass over the torn fragment of the newspaper and read the fine writing.

"Tenderfoot, O. K. Wheels N. G. in desert. Ought to have known better. Stuck for keeps, seems

like. No ranches in sight. Don't know what to do with—" The paper was torn there.

"Malcolm," Virginia began anxiously, "do you suppose that the missing word might have been yearlings? Has some tenderfoot attempted to make away with our entire herd?"

The lad looked serious but after a thoughtful moment he shook his head. "I can't believe it is possible. What paper is this, anyway?"

"A page from the *Chicago Tribune*," Betsy told him. Then, eager to help solve the mystery, she hurried on to say: "Chicago is the place where your cattle were to be sold, isn't it?"

"Yes, I planned shipping the yearlings in a few days. The empty cars are on the side track at Silver Creek station this very minute. As soon as Lucky and I had them loaded, we were to wire Douglas and the cars were to be picked up by the freight that night."

"I know what Betsy thinks," Virginia said. "She believes that some tenderfoot rustler tried to steal the cattle and ship them as his own. Would such a thing be possible, Malcolm?"

"Possible, but not probable," was the answer.

"Then what do you make of it?" Margaret asked.

"I don't," was the smilingly given reply. "But I

do know that we will all starve and that Sing Long will be on the rampage if we don't go out and eat the fine breakfast he has prepared for us."

"Whizzle! I have been so interested and excited that I had actually forgotten that I am almost starved," Betsy declared as they entered the big sunny kitchen, at one end of which was a table that could seat twelve without crowding, for, on the desert, one never knew when a passing cowboy, or a group of them, might stop at meal time.

When the first pangs of hunger had been satisfied, Virginia said: "Now brother, tell us your theory."

"I'd like to hear Betsy's first." Malcolm was much amused by the small, bright-eyed girl who took such an unusual interest (for one feminine) in the solving of mysteries.

They all turned to listen and so Betsy began. "Well, of course I know very little about the ways of the desert, but I should think that Virginia's suggestion, a little while ago, might be the right one. But since you doubt it, Malcolm, I'm beginning to think that the something the writer didn't know what to do with, might not be the stolen yearlings after all."

The lad nodded. Then glancing at Margaret, he asked, "Who else has a theory?" Flushing prettily

as she always did when her guardian addressed her, the quiet Megsy replied, "I don't believe that I have one, but I just know that you have, Malcolm. Won't you tell it to us?"

"I may be wrong," the lad began, "but, from the wording of the memorandum, I believe a boy has written it, and surely a tenderfoot, else he would not have tried to cross the desert in a prairie schooner, if that's what he has. Maybe he's here for his health. Many a lad finds his lungs in danger after years of hard study, and they come out here to rough it and get strong again. Anyway, that's my guess. I don't believe that the writer of this note has ever even heard of our lost yearlings."

"Hark!" Virginia cried, springing up and running to the door. "What's all the commotion outside?"

There was indeed a most unusual commotion not far away, but, from the kitchen window nothing could be seen but the sandy door-yard, the chicken corral, the outhouses and farther down the slope and near the dry creek, the adobe cabin of the Mahoys.

Malcolm, at once on the alert, caught his sombrero from its place near the back door. He leaped from the porch without taking time to descend the steps, and, before the astounded girls could speak, he was

racing for the corral that was down in the valley-like hollow near the towering red windmill.

"Girls!" Virg had listened but a moment when she whirled, her cheeks burning, her eyes glowing, "Don't you know what it means, that bellowing of cattle and shouting of men?"

"It sounds like a round-up to me," Barbara ventured.

"It is! It surely is! Oh, if only someone has found the lost yearlings." The four girls were running so fast that Virg had not breath to finish her sentence. A second later they reached the top of the trail and in the depression below them, they saw something which filled their heart with rejoicing.

"The yearlings! Oh how happy Malcolm will be," Margaret cried. "Virg, you too, how glad you must be!"

"How do you suppose it happened?" Betsy was tremendously interested, this being the first time she had witnessed the driving in of a restless herd of cattle.

"Slim found them," Virg said. "See Megsy, how cleverly he herds them toward the open gate of the corral. There's one that is trying to make a break."

"Goodness that wild one has turned. It's charging right at that cowboy. Slim, did you call him?"

Betsy had her hand on her heart and her eyes expressed terror, but Virginia laughed. "That's nothing unusual. Watch what happens."

It was quite evident that the young cowboy, Slim, had his eye on the angry young steer that had stopped to paw the ground and snort in a most threatening manner. The boy drew rein and coiled his rope. Lucky and Malcolm were also in the saddle and they were trying to quiet the remainder of the herd and drive them into the corral. Slim backed his horse, all the time swinging his rope and keeping a watchful eye on the snorting young steer.

"Whizzle," Betsy clutched Virginia's arm and held tight. "I wish Slim would look where he is going. He may back his horse right over that cliff and into the dry creek."

"Don't worry, dear. Slim knows every step his horse is taking even though he isn't looking. If I didn't know how that cowboy of ours can ride, I too, might be worried. There, now watch!"

Angered beyond endurance by the whistling of the rope as it swung round and round the head of Slim, the enraged creature which knew in some way that this cowboy was depriving him of the freedom of the range, made a sudden lunge, his head bent to bowl over whatever it first struck.

Betsy screamed, but the lowing of the restless cattle drowned her cry. "He'll be thrown! Why doesn't Slim do something?"

"He is waiting his time," Virg said quietly. "See how his pony leaped to one side. They're well trained, those wiry bronchos."

Malcolm and Lucky, having driven the remainder of the herd into the corral, had closed and barred the gate. Malcolm, however, stood there ready to swing it open if the rebellious steer should be headed that way, while Lucky rode out to assist Slim if his services were needed, but they were not, for once again the young steer plunged, the rope sung through the air, and catching the forefeet of the animal, sent it with a thud to the ground.

The loop of Lucky's rope caught about its neck. Then, when Slim's rope had loosened, the creature scrambled to its feet, and, half stunned, permitted itself to be led and driven into the corral. Then the gates were again closed.

"Now tell us, where did you find them?" Malcolm asked Slim.

The good looking young cowboy removed his sombrero, wiped his hot brow with his red bandana handkerchief and then burst into unexpected laughter.

"Well, Malcolm," he chuckled, "Ah reckon that thar dod-busted steer that's been so plumb rampagious this mornin' was at the bottom of the whole thing."

"Then you don't think that gypsies tried to steal them?" It was the first time that Betsy had addressed Slim.

He had not noticed the young stranger. Virginia, noting his expression of surprise exclaimed, "Betsy, this is Slim our prize broncho buster and sure shot roper."

The young cowboy laughed disparagingly. "Don't take no stock in all a-that, Miss Betsy," he said.

"Oh, I know it without being told," was the young girl's eager response. "Didn't I see you rope that wild steer with my very own eyes."

Malcolm, anxious to know where the cattle had been found turned the subject back to the point where it had digressed.

"No, sir,'twant gypsies nor yet again cattle thieves that let the yearlings out of their pen. 'Twas that wild one himself."

"But, Slim, that doesn't seem probable or possible for the fence was not broken and the cattle cannot open the gate," Malcolm was saying when Betsy who had turned to glance at the corral in which the

restless herd was pacing back and forth, uttered a cry of warning.

"Look! Quick! Slim is right! That wild steer is pushing the bar."

With a variety of expletives the cowboys leaped forward and were in time to prevent a second escape of the herd.

For sometime after that, they were engaged in making the fastening of the gate more secure. The girls remained as interested spectators. When Malcolm at last straightened up, he turned to them and said with his pleasant smile, "And so, Mistress Betsy, we are doomed to disappoint you, for there really isn't any mystery to unravel after all."

But Slim had again removed his sombrero and he was thoughtfully rubbing his glossy brown hair. Suddenly he turned toward the little stranger.

"Ah say, Miss Betsy, what was that thar you asked me in the beginning. 'Pears to me like 'twas suthin' namin' gypsies."

"Yes, it was." Then eagerly, hopefully. "Mr. Slim, you didn't see anything of them while you were hunting for the cattle, did you?"

"Wall now, I reckon mebbe I did and yet agin mebbe, I didn't. 'Ah'm not tolerably sartin', but I saw suthin' mighty perplexin'."

Then inquiringly to Malcolm. "You-all don' figger that any copper diggers 'd be loony enuf to cross the desert in a wagon, do you?"

"No, indeed. I'm as good as certain that they wouldn't," Malcolm began, when Betsy hopped up and down and clapped her hands as she interrupted. "Oh! Oh! tell us quick, Mr. Slim, *did* you see the wagon? We've been hunting for it everywhere."

The cowboy was so plainly puzzled that Virginia told him the story of the gypsy caravan as Davie had told it to Malcolm and Lucky.

"Wall, all as I saw was tracks headin', seemed like toward Puffed Snake Water Hole. But Ah was driving the herd in jest then an' couldn't leave to do no investigatin'."

"Good! I'm glad they were heading away from V. M. Ranch, whoever they are." Malcolm said then added: "Boys, I think we'd better all three drive this herd in to the station. It's going to take some skillful handling to get them aboard the cars. It's nine now and I expected to get them loaded by this time." Then anxiously. "Slim, you've had a hard time of it this past twenty-four hours. You ought to get some sleep before we start."

"Caint spare the time, Malcolm. Ah reckon thar'll

be enough for sleep when this here herd is boxed up in the car. Ah reckon thar will."

Lucky had been silently watching the restlessly lowing heard. "Malcolm," he said, "we'd better start, 'pears like. That wild one's got to wear a drag to keep it from boltin', an' that'll make it plumb slow goin' for the rest."

"Right you are," the young master of V. M. replied. "We certainly don't want to take any chances on a stampede today, since the cars are scheduled to be picked up by the through freighter tonight at seven." Then, turning to his sister, he added. "Virg, will you girls pack us some grub and we'll start as soon as we can get the herd in shape."

"Indeed we will." Then catching the hands of two of her friends and nodding to the third, away she ran toward the ranch house.

"Oh, I just adore all this," Betsy exclaimed an hour later when the girls, having packed the saddle bags with good things until they bulged, stood out on the front veranda watching the three cowboys as they drove the still restless herd up over the mesa.

"That poor wild steer will wish he had been less obstreperous," the quiet Margaret said. "He can hardly take a step without stumbling over that long pole that drags between his front legs."

"I like him," Babs surprised the others by remarking. "I like his spirit. Somehow a desire for freedom seems to belong to the desert and his surely is unquenchable, but next week he will be—"

"Oh, do let's forget that part of it." Virginia spoke with unusual seriousness. "I hate it." Then noting the expressions of inquiry, she explained. "I don't understand in the least what makes me feel so queerly about it. Nevertheless, I do. I don't believe that we have any right to take that wonderful thing, Life, from any creature to which it has been given. We may find sometime that we have been doing something grievously wrong. But there," she added in a gayer tone, "since I am the part owner of a business that raises live stock for the sole purpose of taking life, it hardly behooves me to moralize about it."

"Does Malcolm know that you feel that way?" Margaret asked.

Virg shook her head. Then slipping her hand in that of her friend, Megsy, said earnestly, "I agree with you. I'd heaps rather raise beets to sell."

A merry laugh greeted this remark, and then Betsy, who was never long content with just conversing exclaimed. "Virg, let's do something interesting right after lunch."

Virginia smiled. "I was going to suggest that we all take a siesta." Then she laughed at the dismay pictured in the face which a moment before had been so eager.

But the youngest was not to be daunted. Whirling toward Barbara, she wheedled. "Babsie, you don't want to sleep, do you? Let Megsy and Virg siesticate if they wish, but suppose you and I go for a ride."

"I'll make a bargain with you, Betsy." It was Virg who was speaking. "If you'll be as quiet as a little mouse and let us, who wish to nap until three, we'll all go for a ride anywhere you choose."

"Oh, will you, honest injun, cross your heart!" The would-be little detective seemed more eager than before and the reason was that she wanted to get Virginia to promise to do something without telling her what it was.

The unsuspecting older girl nodded, then as the bell was ringing they all went in to lunch. Betsy lingered back of Virg and beckoning Babs she whispered something in her ear. "Oh, Virg won't do that," Barbara told her.

"But she'll have to. You yourself heard her promise to ride this afternoon in any direction that I wish and I'm just wild to go there."

CHAPTER VII.

A PLANNED RIDE.

DIRECTLY after lunch, Virginia, Margaret and Barbara retired to their rooms for the customary afternoon nap which seemed to be as much a part of desert life as anything else in the routine. The sun beat down upon the shimmering white sand relentlessly during the noon hours and all live creatures were glad to seek the cool of some shadow or to hide in underground burrows if that was according to their nature.

Betsy, unused to sleeping during the day, had decided to take that time for letter writing. She was wild to tell her Cousin Bob, who was fourteen, of all the exciting things which had befallen her since her departure from boarding school such a very short time before.

How he would envy her. Virg had suggested that she write at the big old desk which stood on the shady side of the long living room and there,

for a quiet hour the little girl sat scribbling as fast as her pencil would fly and the story of her adventures was so thrillingly told that the boy, who was to receive it, would indeed be envious. She had just concluded with—"Virg hasn't any idea where I am going to suggest that we go for our ride when she wakes up, but of course she'll have to go because she has promised. I'm ever and ever so sure that an exciting adventure awaits us and I'll add it to this letter before I send it. There'll be plenty of time, anyway, for the mail pouch is only taken to the station about twice a week."

It was at this point in the epistle that the three girls, who had been asleep, appeared and they were dressed in their riding habits.

"You'll have to don yours, Betsy," Babs called. "I'll wait for you. Virg and Megsy are going down to the corral to saddle our horses."

While the young would-be detective was changing her apparel, Babs sat on the arm of a chair watching her. "Virg has forgotten all about her promise to you," she volunteered. "I heard her tell Margaret that she wanted to ride over to Hog Canon and see the poor dry ranchers who live there. She has brought some gifts for the three children and their mother."

"Oh dear, isn't that just too provoking. I did so want to ride in the direction of that Puffed Snake Water Hole and see if we could find the gypsy caravan, but, of course, if our hostess has other plans, I suppose I'll have to give up mine, only I don't think she should have promised. Honestly I don't."

Babs hardly knew what to say. "But dear, you can visit that water hole some other time, maybe tomorrow. Wouldn't that do as well?"

"Why, of course not Babs. You know as well as I do that if we are to get there before that gypsy caravana moves on, we'll have to go today. They're not going to just camp out there and wait to be found."

"Well, you'll have to be the one to remind Virg of her promise. I won't. I heard her say that the little woman who lives over in Hog Canon is very frail and that she has brought her some things that she needs just dreadfully."

Betsy sighed as she laced the riding boots that Virg had loaned her, but all she said was "What's a dry rancher anyway? Someone who's awfully poor I judge."

Babs nodded. "Yes indeed. Mr. Wallace, 'Foolish Andy,' I've heard him called, is certainly

not prosperous. Dry ranching means trying to get along without water except such as can be caught in a cistern during the rainy season. There's no water for the few head of cattle they have except in water holes. I guess they're poor enough all right."

Betsy stood up clothed, but only partly resigned to the seemingly inevitable. "Virg would rather go on a visit of mercy any time than try to unravel a mystery which shows how different we are," she confided to her companion as they ran down the trail that led to the corral where the others awaited them with the four ponies saddled and ready.

A small pack-horse near had on its back two saddle bags well packed. "Here you are." Virg sang out, then noting an expression of disappointment in the face of their youngest, the hostess recalled something. "Oh Betsy," she said self-rebukingly, "I completely forgot that you were to choose the direction of our ride this afternoon and here I have packed Old Stoic with food and gifts that I want to take to the Wallace family over in Hog Canon. Well, I can unpack him again if you wish me to keep that promise.

"My only reason for wanting to go today is that the children have heard that I am home from school,

Slim told them, and they sent word that they're wild to see me, and Slim said I should have seen poor Mrs. Wallace's expression when she heard it. He said that it was as though she had heard something that was going to give her a new lease on life.

"But of course one day more won't matter if you wish to hold me to my promise."

"I should say not, Virg!" Betsy spoke emphatically. "I was merely going to suggest that we go over to that Puffed Snake Water Hole Mr. Slim told about and see if we could find the gypsy caravan. But it might be a wild-goose chase." Virginia laughed. "It would be, I can assure you. The odors around that water hole are such that even gypsies wouldn't linger there long. They are miles and miles away by now." But Betsy interrupted. "Virg, how can they be? Don't you recall what the writing on the newspaper said. 'Stuck for keeps.' No ranches in sight."

"Then there's no use visiting the Puffed Snake Water Hole for one can plainly see Slater's Ranch from there. Now the question is," Virg looked from one friend to another, "which way shall we go? Of course we can visit Hog Canon tomorrow and—"

"Indeed not! I'm not as selfish as all that. We'll visit Hog Canon and your poor family today, then tomorrow we'll hunt for the gypsy caravan."

Little did Betsy dream what her decision would lead to.

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD STOIC.

SINGLE file the four mounted girls rode down the trail which led across the dry creek bottom for a time and then ascended the rather steep opposite bank. The fifth horse "Old Stoic" followed faithfully. When they were again on the level trail, Virg in the lead, smiled over her shoulder. Betsy just back of her was evidently deep in thought.

"What are you puzzling about now, little mystery solver?" she sang out gaily.

Betsy looked up brightly. "I'm trying to solve three things at once."

Babs and Megsy rode up, and, as the sand was hard enough to permit, they continued in a group which was better for conversation.

"What are they? And how are you succeeding?" Each maid asked a question.

Betsy laughed. "I'm wondering what Puffed Snakes are. I've heard of rattlers and copper heads and—and water snakes, but never Puffed ones."

"Guess!" Virg turned to say.

"I don't have to guess because I know." Margaret smiled at Betsy. "Use that good brain of yours. It's ever so easy. It isn't the kind of snake. It's something that happens to it."

"Hm. Let me see. It's the name of a water hole with a dreadful odor." Betsy seemed to be thinking hard. Suddenly she laughed. "Oh, of course, that's easy! A snake fell into the water hole, couldn't get out and puffed."

"Righto!" Virg had whirled her pony and to the great admiration of the other girls, was riding backwards.

"What was your second puzzle?" Babs asked.

"Why this picturesque place ahead of us in the mountains, should be called Hog Canon?"

"Oh, that is too easy," Megsy declared.

"Probably because some former dry rancher tried to raise hogs," Babs suggested.

"You are nearly right, but not entirely so. It was Nature itself that raised the little wild hogs that 'abounded,' as the story books say, in these mountains, but they are gone now or nearly so."

"Goodness, you don't mean the kind that I've seen in pictures with tusks that look so dangerous."

"No, not wild boars. These were very small

creatures, I've heard father say, but they were all gone when brother and I came to the desert to live. Now what is your third puzzle."

"Why you named your pack horse Old Stoic."

"All you have to do is to look at him and that mystery is solved. He hasn't a spark of fire in his eye, he has never been known, within the memory of the oldest inhabitant, to do anything but plod. I guess the colt in him vanished years ago."

The girls all turned to look at the pack horse that was following them but it deigned not to return their notice. It did indeed seem to be stolid and stunned. Suddenly Virginia began to laugh. She was riding ahead by that time and the others pressed forward to hear the cause of her mirth.

"What's the joke, Virg," Betsy said, "Let us all in on it. Is it something about Old Stoic?"

Virginia nodded. "Yes, it is," she said merrily. "I believe after all I have wronged the old horse. I recall now that brother modified his statement that nothing could stir an interest in Stoic. There was one thing he said that could."

"What was it?" Betsy was always curious about everything. None of the girls had a brain more eagerly alert.

"A bear! Malcolm said that Old Stoic can smell

a bear farther than any horse he ever rode and run faster to try to get away from it, but apart from that, he shows no sign of interest in life except in doing his duty as a pack animal and doing it well."

Betsy looked anxiously toward the rugged Seven Peak Range which they were approaching. "I say, Virg," she said, "there aren't any bears in the mountains these days are there?"

Then the questioner sighed with relief when she heard the reply.

"No, dear, nary a one, or so few that one seldom if ever appears. I did hear Lucky say last winter that he saw bear tracks in the snow way up north in the higher, colder mountains, but I don't believe they come down this way now-a-days. They did, though, when Lucky was a boy. His father was a trapper and exciting tales he can tell. We'll get him to recount the most thrilling of them for us some night when we're all sitting around the fire."

The girls having ridden for several miles without stopping were glad, when Virg suggested that they stop awhile in the shade of a giant cactus. Dismounting, she ran back to Old Stoic who had stopped with the others and slipping her hand into one of the saddle bags she brought out four oranges. "I'm not robbing the Wallace family," she smilingly

told them, "for I put these in here just for our very own refreshment. I knew we'd all be hot and thirsty by the time we reached this half-way point."

The girls were indeed glad to eat the sweet juicy fruit. Betsy, unused to the saddle was also pleased to have a chance to stretch her legs, and so, slipping from her mount, she threw herself down on the sand, warm even in the shade of the cactus, but she was on her feet again almost as quickly when she heard Babs laughingly caution her. "Look out for tarantulas and scorpions."

"Too, you might be lying directly over the hole of a rattler," Megsy added. But Virg protested. "Let the poor girl rest. There isn't a poisonous creature in our immediate neighborhood, I'll vouch for that."

But Betsy would not lie down again. Pretending to want to make the acquaintance of the pack horse she walked back toward where he so patiently stood, half dozing. Patting him on the head she said. "Old Stoic, if there's a rattler or a tarantula, a scorpion or anything else startling or unusual around, you let me know won't you." Then she cried triumphantly. "Look girls, he's nodding his head. He is intelligent after all. He just assumes that dull uninterested expression for reasons of his own. Maybe he's a detective. That's just the way Dad

does when he's in a group where he expects to overhear something of great importance. He acts as though he were intently thinking of something far away."

The listeners laughed. "Honestly Betsy, I doubt your theory in this case. I don't believe Old Stoic thinks. He seems to just plod, but now if you're all rested enough, we'll up in the the saddle and away."

"Whizzle, but it's hot, hotter, hottest!" Betsy exclaimed when they had ridden a mile farther on their way.

"Or, as the story books say, 'The relentless tropical sun beat down upon the lone traveler and his beast of burden. Nowhere about him on the vast sandy waste could he see a sprig of vegetation that would suggest a life-saving oasis—' "

"Oh Babs, have a heart! I'd heaps rather have you speil about ice cream sodas and cool things like that if it's all the same to you."

Virg smiled back over her shoulder. "Perhaps we ought to have waited for a cooler hour," she said. "I forgot that you Eastern girls are not as used to our Arizona sun as I am, and, I'll confess, it is rather warm, but there's hope ahead, for in just a few moments we will have sighted the canon up which we will soon be riding."

Betsy drew her sombrero farther down over her eyes, and then peered ahead through the air that was quivering with the heat.

The canon which they were nearing did not look inviting. There were no green growths that would have suggested a cool brook flowing down among them, only bare jagged rocks with here and there a scraggly mesquite bush growing in the cracks of rock where sand had gathered.

"Well, I don't wonder the neighbors call the gentleman who choose that canon as his dwelling place 'foolish,' she remarked with a little disdainful grunt.

"Oh, but that isn't his chief folly, or rather, not the one for which he is noted far and wide," Virginia looked over her shoulder to inform them.

"Why is he called Foolish Andy, Virg? I've often wondered," Megsy inquired.

"It's because he is an inventor. He is very well educated, and seems always to be inventing something which he is sure will bring his little family fame and fortune. Mrs. Wallace tells me that they were comfortably well off, once upon a time, but that all they could save had been squandered on one invention after another and they became poorer and poorer until now they can hardly keep alive, but

nothing seems to quench Mr. Wallace's faith in his inventive powers. I heard brother say that the instrument he is now trying to perfect, he believes will not only bring him the money he needs but be a great boon to mankind, or at least to that portion of it that chooses the desert places for a home."

"What is the instrument, Virg?" Megsy inquired.

"It's some very sensitive mechanism that is supposed to locate water and that is why Mr. Wallace choose the driest section of the desert in this neighborhood. He particularly likes Hog Canon, and his theory is that since it was, once upon a time, overrun with small hogs, there must then have been water. He believes, that the stream took to flowing underground as they so often do in Arizona and that his instrument will locate it. Then this land, which he has taken up, homesteaded I mean, will be invaluable. Brother says he is right about that, but the other ranchers have no faith whatever in his invention. At least it hasn't succeeded. Mr. Slater is a very wealthy, progressive man and when the Wallaces first moved here, he took an interest in the instrument. When he was about to have a well dug for his new windmill, he sent for Mr. Wallace to help him locate a spot where he would be sure to find water. Fate was against the inventor, for the

very spot where an excellent well has been dug, the instrument reported no water. That is why the poor man, who still clings to his faith in the invention is called 'Foolish Andy'."

"He ought to be put in an insane asylum," was Betsy's indignant verdict. "The very idea of his being permitted to bring such misfortune on the heads of his innocent wife and children. Why doesn't she leave him?"

"For the simple or rather wonderful reason that she loves him and has faith in him," Virginia replied, "but, unfortunately, if he ever does succeed, I fear it will be too late for his wife to share in whatever prosperity will follow. If they don't find water very soon now, the little woman will have slipped away. Slim tells me that she seems to be holding to life by a thread. That will mean three more children left motherless in the world."

Betsy flared. "I just hate that selfish man! I'm sorry we came! I know I won't be able to speak civilly to him." But Virg remarked, "You'll be surprised to find how different he is from the man you have pictured. Now, here's where we turn to enter the canon. Why, what is the matter with Old Stoic?" The girls whirled in their saddles to look at the pack horse. To their amazement they saw

that it had stopped and was staring at the dark entrance of the canon ahead with a look of fear, ears thrown back and every muscle quivering.

"Oh, it must be a bear," Betsy cried, when, with a shrill frightened whistle, Old Stoic turned tail toward the mountains, and, burdened though he was, raced across the trackless sand, but not toward home.

CHAPTER IX.

WAS IT A BEAR.

"Do you think old Stoic saw a bear?" Margaret asked as the girls, puzzled indeed, by the faithful creature's strange and unexpected behavior sat in their saddles, two of them gazing anxiously into the dark entrance of the canon, while the third, Virg, watched the flight of their pack animal.

"Oh I can't believe it possible that there is a bear about," she said. "We are very near the Wallace's cabin now, that is, it's not more than half a mile away and bears do not venture near settlements if they know it."

"Maybe this one is a big grizzly and maybe he's eaten the Wallace family all up and perhaps be coming now to—"

Megsy laughed at the wide-eyed Betsy. "To eat us, I suppose you are going to say. But honestly, dear child, if he has eaten five Wallaces and their burros, I don't believe he'll have much of an appetite for delicacies like us."

Betsy turned rebuking eyes. "I don't see how you can joke at a time like this when maybe something terrible is about to happen."

Virg was relieved to see that the pack horse had come to a stand-still in the shade of a giant cactus about an eighth of a mile away. "Girls," she suggested, "would you like to wait here until I go and get Old Stoic or—"

"What!" Betsy fairly screamed. "We stay here when any minute a bear or something is going to come right out of the canon? Nixie for mine. Where you go, there I'll go too."

The other girls could not keep from laughing which further increased the indignation of their youngest. "Laugh if you want to," she said, "but didn't Virg tell us herself that Old Stoic never showed sign of fear except when a bear was near?"

Their hostess agreed. "I'll confess I did. That is what brother told me, but of course there must be something else that can frighten our faithful pack animal." Then with sudden animation and pointing toward the mountains a little way beyond them, Virginia cried: "Look! girls, look!"

Every one gazed, expecting to see something very unusual, Betsy alone was convinced that it would be a huge grizzly.

"Why, that's nothing but smoke." Babs spoke regretfully. She had almost hoped that it would be a bear for she knew, what Betsy did not, that they were harmless unless cornered or attacked.

"Why Virginia, surely Old Stoic isn't afraid of smoke, is he?" Margaret turned inquiringly toward her adopted sister.

"No indeed! Brother always takes that pack horse with him when he goes to the mine and they have camp fires every night."

"What do you suppose this smoke means? 'A camp?'" Barbara began when Betsy interrupted eagerly, "Oh Virg, maybe that's where the gypsy caravan is stuck. Do you suppose it might be?"

Virginia shaded her eyes and gazed long at the jutting point of rock which hid from their sight whatever was beyond it. "It's a fire of course," she told them. "Shall we ride over and see who is camping there?"

"Oh yes, let's!" Betsy was her old brave self again. She had no fear of gypsies nor of cattle rustlers she was sure, though she had never seen any of them except on the screen.

A short gallop took them to a point where they could see the fire. Virg, in the lead, uttered a cry of surprise, then turned and beckoned. "It is the

gypsy caravan, or at least it is a covered wagon, like a prairie schooner of the olden days, I should say, but there seems to be no one around. Shall we go closer?"

"Of course!" This emphatically from Betsy. "Haven't I been wild—crazy to find this very caravan, and you don't suppose I'd leave without seeing the gypsies. Anyway, aren't they in trouble? Don't you remember the hand-writing said 'Stuck for keeps. No ranches in sight'." So Virg laughingly led the way toward the apparently deserted covered wagon.

"We're wrong about one thing," the young mistress of V. M. remarked. "This is not the caravan that was stuck, for the wheels are quite free, at present, anyway."

"I wonder where the gypsies are." Betsy was dismounting as she spoke. "I'm going up to their front door and knock," she informed the others. This she did pounding loudly on the wooden sides of the wagon. A low growl from within was the only answer but it was sufficient, as Betsy said afterwards, to make her hair stand on end. With a shrill cry she took to her heels and where she would have gone, it is hard to know, had she not suddenly been confronted by a girl of about sixteen

who had leaped from between the flaps of the tent-like covering. Her expression was at first puzzled, then merry and apologetic.

Holding out her hand to Betsy, she exclaimed. "Oh, do forgive us for having given you such a dreadful scare when you came to call." Then her sweeping glance, which held an inquiry, included them all. "You have come to call, haven't you?"

Virginia had dismounted and the other two girls did likewise. "We did not really start out with that intention, we'll have to confess," she said, with her friendliest smile, "because you see we did not know of your existence." Then, fearing that this was not quite truthful, she concluded. "That is, we did, and we didn't."

Noting the puzzled expression in the fine face of the girl she was addressing, Virginia told the whole story of the tale that the station master's boy had told of the large caravan of thieving gypsies, and of their subsequent loss of cattle, their search for the caravan, the finding of the wagon trail and then the newspaper with its message.

"Oh, Brother Gordon must have written that. We were stuck for a day and a night but some prospectors, I think they were called, came along and dug us out. We're on our way back to Douglas

now, but we've stopped here to get water and fill our canteens. Oh good, here comes brother. He's been up the canon where the prospectors told us we would find a rancher who had water in a cistern."

A tall lad, too pale to be a real Westener, appeared on a loping run from the canon beyond. "No luck, sister," he had started to say when he saw the three strangers and their horses.

"We have guests," the girl called happily. Then to the others: "You can't guess how glad I am to see someone of my own age and I'm just wild to know who you are and where you came from. Can't you stay and have supper with us? We have it very early and it's now after three."

The lad came up and snatching off his hat, he stood waiting for his sister's invitation to be acknowledged, but not accepted, as Virg told them that their home was some distance and that her brother would be troubled if he returned from Silver Creek and found her not there. "But now since we have met so informally, let's introduce ourselves," she concluded. This was done and the four visitors found that instead of gypsies, the two were the son and daughter of a copper magnate whose name was very familiar to Virginia, since he it was

who owned many of the mines and smelting founderies in Douglas and Bisbee.

"We are truly tenderfoots," the girl, whose name was Annette Traylor, told them, "for our home is in New York City and we have never before been on the desert where our dad came from college to prospect so many years ago. He's always telling us tales of his adventures and so this year, when brother broke down in his freshman year at Yale, dad said the best thing for us to do would be to visit his old haunts on the desert. He was coming West to inspect some mines and as he was to be busy for about two weeks, he put us in the care of an old man whom he had known years ago and told him to show us the sights."

"Then you're not alone?" Virginia looked about for a guide but saw no one.

Annette smiled. "Yes, we are, quite alone and unprotected. You see it happened in this wise. We hadn't been gone more than a day from Douglas when Old Piute, as Dad called the guide who was part Indian and the rest French, got sick, and so we sent him back. He didn't want to go, but we could easily see that he was too ill to travel, so we gave him the money Dad had promised him if he returned us safely to Douglas in two weeks.

Then we gave him one of the burros in our train and he sadly rode away. We could see him shaking his old grizzled head until he was out of sight. Brother declared that a youth who was wise enough to go to Yale ought to be wise enough to drive a team of wirey horses over the desert. You see where we made the mistake was in not minding Old Piute. He told us to keep to the roads where autos travel, but brother thought there would be no adventures along a beaten way and so he turned out into the open desert and the third day we stuck."

The lad laughed in a hearty boyish manner. "Well, I'm glad we did since we met one of the most interesting characters I ever knew outside of the 'Dick Dead-eye' books and, too, we acquired a bear."

"A what?" Betsy's eyes were big and round.

The lad nodded. "Yes indeed, a real bear. The old miner had had him since his cub-hood days and he's as tame a pet as one could wish to see."

Virginia laughed. "Which brings us back to the first part of our visit to you." Then she told about Old Stoic and how he had evidently smelled the bear and had taken to his heels. Gordon Traylor was delighted. "Great Stuff," he said inelegantly. Then added, "Miss Virginia, loan me your horse

and I'll bring back the truant member of your band."

Virg shaded her eyes and remarked. "Good. He is still patiently waiting in the shade of distant cactus, and while you are gone, we'll get better acquainted with your sister."

CHAPTER X.

A VISIT TO HOG CANON.

HALF an hour later the girls saw Annette's brother returning, leading the faithful old pack animal who had evidently forgotten his former fear and was plodding along with his usual lack of interest in all about him, until, as they neared the mountains a breeze evidently carried the scent of the creature he so feared.

However the lad had been expecting this very thing to happen and he was on the watch. At the first movement of Old Stoic, Gordon had whirled in his saddle and was holding firmly to the rope by which he was leading the pack animal.

But try as he might to persuade, to assure, to command, the stolid creature would not move. He did not attempt to run away but having planted all four feet squarely in the sand, mule fashion, there he stood and would not budge.

Laughingly Virginia leaped to her horse's back, and galloped out to lend what assistance she might.

She patted Old Stoic, assured him that it was only a tame bear and was not in any way a creature to be feared, but the stubborn animal blinked and winked his expressionless eyes and just stood.

"I'll tell you what," Virg suggested. "Let's lead him away from your camp. There's a trail up to the Wallace cabin from beyond that jutting out rock. It's about an eighth of a mile from here and as the wind is not blowing in that direction, I believe Old Stoic will soon again forget the near presence of a bear." This was done. The small horse began to walk when Gordon pulled him in another direction. When the watching girl observed that the pack animal was willing to be led to the point she had indicated, she said that she would ride back to the covered wagon and tell the girls to accompany her. Although Gordon had recently visited the cabin in the canon in search of water, he had seen no one but the boy Peter who had gloomily told him that they didn't have any to spare.

The lad having always had a secret desire to be an inventor, and having, in fact, won the admiration of his boy friends by fashioning all kinds of mechanical devices for toys in his own shop, was very eager to see the man who had a vision which he could not fulfill.

"May Annette and I go with you?" he asked eagerly.

"Why, of course, you may. We'll be glad to have you. You will like poor Mr. Wallace. He is very lovable in spite of his queerness."

Meanwhile Betsy having been permitted to peep at the tame bear (which to her thought had growled at her in a manner most untame) was glad indeed when Virg rode up and told them all to accompany her. Single file they rode up the narrow rugged trail, Virg in the lead and Gordon last that he might still hold the guiding rope attached to Old Stoic not knowing at what minute the wind might change and startle the pack animal into flight.

As they neared the shack-like cabin, half hidden by overhanging boulders, Virg gave a call with which she always heralded her approach. Instantly three children ran pell mell to the top of the trail, their homely freckled faces shining with their joy at seeing the good angel friend whom they had so missed.

Little Jane, aged six, hopped up and down so fast (clapping her hands all the time) that her two braids bobbed merrily.

Thoughtful eyed Sara, who was so like her faithful mother, smiled too, but made no move of wel-

come although her heart was just as glad. Twelve year old Peter raced to meet them down the trail and catching Virginia's bridle, he looked up with adoration in his red-brown eyes. "Oh, Miss Virgie," he cried, "Ma's been that eager to have you come home from the East. Often I've heard her say, 'Somehow things will be better when Miss Virginia comes'."

There were sudden tears in the eyes of the girl, and reaching down she put her hand over the small brown one on her horse's head.

"I'm glad to get home, Peter. How are your mother and dad?"

There was a shade of anxiety on the boy's freckled face. "Pa's been took queer this very day," he said looking up toward the cabin as though he feared he might be overheard, "and Ma says now with the water most gone, she just doesn't know what we are to do. There weren't any late rains and the cistern's most empty."

"Dear boy, your mother must not worry about that. There's plenty of water at V. M. and you are welcome to all you can carry." But the girl's heart was heavy for even as she made the offer, she knew that there would be no convenient way of packing water so many miles across the desert.

Having dismounted on the small flat space which

served as a dooryard, the others turned anxiously to Virg. "Ought we to remain," Annette Traylor inquired. "If the Wallaces have this new trouble, we might be intruding."

But Gordon stepped forward and said earnestly, "Miss Virginia, I would like to meet Mr. Wallace. I believe that I can be of service to him."

Mrs. Wallace, more pale and fragile than when Virg had gone east to school appeared in the doorway and Virginia went forward to greet her. The girls saw her bend and kiss the sunken cheek and were touched at the light of tenderness in the face of the older woman.

It was evident that the girl was inquiring about poor Mr. Wallace. "I don't know what has happened exactly. Something that discouraged him so much that he just gave up and ever since he's sat there in his chair around on the north side of the cabin and staring into space, though once in a while he does say something, but it's about his instrument and I don't understand."

Meanwhile Gordon had seen the listless figure of the man, and, with an earnest desire to be of service, he had walked toward him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wallace," the boy said, hoping to attract the attention of the inventor, but

the dreamy grey-blue eyes of the thin, kindly-faced man did not move from what seemed to be one definite spot farther up the canon.

The boy, noting that the girls had gone in the cabin with the mother, sat on a rock near to wait until a more opportune moment to again address the man who seemed deep in thought.

At last, in a voice that seemed infinitely sad, the inventor spoke. "I've failed! I was so sure it could be done, but now, I know the truth. I've failed!"

"In what way have you failed, Mr. Wallace?" Again hopefully the boy ventured a remark.

This time the dreamy grey-blue eyes turned toward him. "I was sure there was a hidden spring up there," he said more to himself than to a listener. "But the instrument doesn't show water and I won't dynamite until it does."

Gordon, more interested than he thought wise to show, asked, "Mr. Wallace, may I see your instrument?"

The older man nodded and pointed toward a long narrow wooden box on the ground near.

Reverentially the lad knelt and lifted the cover. There lay an instrument of delicate mechanism. At the sight of it, the inventor's eyes burned and leaning forward he said, Gordon thought almost an-

grily, "Give it to me! I'll break it into a thousand pieces. I've given my life's blood to try to perfect it, I've caused untold suffering to my wife and children, but, God knows, I meant no harm. I had faith in it. I dreamed that a fortune would be theirs, everything, everything, schooling for the kiddies, Peter was to go to Yale where I went."

Gordon was on his feet at once, and, grasping the thin hand of the man, he cried in boyish glee, "I say, Mr. Wallace, I'm bully glad that you went to Yale. And don't you worry. It's always darkest before the dawn, you know that. Peter'll make college. Everything will turn out all right. You see if it doesn't. Don't give up. Keep your faith."

The dreamy eyes had turned toward the boy when he began this enthusiastic outburst, and in them there gradually dawned a light of understanding.

"Who are you?" the man inquired as one awakening from a sleep. "I haven't seen you before, have I?"

"No, Mr. Wallace. I'm just passing this way, but I'm ever so interested in your invention. Won't you come up to the spot where you are sure there is water, or ought to be, and show me how it works."

There was a sudden renewed eagerness in the eyes of the poor man who had been so scoffed and laughed

at. "Why, would you really like to see it work?" he asked as though hardly able to believe his ears.

"Wouldn't I though," the lad had hold of the man's hand and was firmly lifting him to his feet. Then he added confidentially, "I'm something of an inventor myself in a small way. I say, Mr. Wallace, I'll bet you have a good thing there. May be it needs a little different adjusting. Let's try it out."

It was pitiful to see the joy in the dim eyes of the man who had failed. Here was someone, what if only a boy, someone who had faith in him. With shaking hands he lifted the instrument he had a moment before threatened to break into a thousand pieces, and with an eagerness he had never again expected to feel, he led the way up, up the canon with a sureness of step that amazed the lad who had such a brief time before pitied his weakness.

"Are you good for a stiff climb?" the man turned to call. "There's a wall of rock ahead that's as perpendicular as a barn door, but there's no way but to go up over it to reach the spot which I am sure long years ago was the source of a water way. See! See!" he cried excitedly. "Now, you know why I am so sure there has been water here."

The lad, looking ahead at the huge boulder, saw on its surface a smooth, many-colored groove which

could only have been made by running water. "It wasn't much of a volume, I'll agree, but there *was* water, but where is it now?" Then again inquiringly, "Do you think you can climb it?"

"Certainly, sir, if you can," the boy replied, amazed though that the man so recently weak, could even think of making the attempt.

"Well, then, follow me closely. I've been up so many times, I know just where the indentures in the rock will serve for steps."

The lad inwardly confessed that it was an almost impossible feat, but if one Yale man could accomplish it, he assured himself, then so too could another.

At length they stood above the boulder and saw that the canon had narrowed until the rocks overhanging on one side often touched the opposite wall.

"There's a hidden spring, I am convinced, somewhere about here," the man's eyes were no longer dreamy but shining with the light of rekindled faith.

"I believe you are right, Mr. Wallace." The lad leaped to a spot where he saw another of the smoothed grooves in the rocks. "Let's try it here," he suggested. The instrument was set up, and Mr. Wallace explained that if there were water, it was his hope that the sensitized swinging needle would

dip and point toward it, but it made no movement at all.

The lad on his knees was watching it intently. Looking up he saw the old expression of despair returning to the ashen face of the man. That would never do. Hope *must* be kept alive.

"I say, Mr. Wallace, don't you think maybe that needle's held too tight? Have you ever tried loosening that minute screw there? Gee, but I'd jolly like to try that experiment."

Almost mechanically the inventor put his hand in a large leather pocket and drew out an infinitesimally small screw driver. "Do what you wish," he said as he sat upon a flat rock and leaned his head on his hands. "I've failed. Not that I have any reason to be sure that there *is* water here, but it did not move over at Slaters and there *was* water."

While the man talked, the boy, with heart beating like a trip-hammer, was actually praying for inspiration while he loosened ever so little the tiny screw that held the sensitive needle. But even then, it did not stir.

"I say, Mr. Wallace, may I take it higher up? Way to the very top of the canon?"

The older man shook his head. "No use, son.

There aren't any watermarks farther up and its almost impassible."

"But, may I try?"

A silent, resigned nod was the only answer and so securing the instrument, the lad carefully climbed over boulders, higher and higher. At last he stopped. Mr. Wallace had spoken truly, there were no signs of the water marks that had been made, no one knew how many years before. Retracing his steps, he turned a little to the right. Something seemed to impell him to stoop and look into a fissure where a boulder, perhaps ages before, had been rent asunder by some tremendous power, an earth-quake, without doubt.

It was an almost impossible feat to hold himself so that he could thrust the instrument into the fissure, but he did it, and with a startling suddenness, the sensitive needle dipped straight down.

"Mr. Wallace! Mr. Wallace! Come quick! I've found the spring."

The boy's triumphant cry rang out, reverberating down the canon and penetrating even the again dulled senses of the inventor. Not for one moment did the boy doubt that the needle was telling the truth.

Unable to wait for the older man to climb to him,

Gordon fairly leaped down from rock to rock, though he wondered afterwards at the sureness with which he had stepped, and catching the man's hand, he dragged him up, up until the fissure was seen in a perilous place beyond and below.

"Why son, you couldn't get down there. No one could," the man said.

"But I did! See! I just chanced to find the way. I guess my guardian angel showed it to me. The instrument's in that fissure and the needle dipped. Mr. Wallace, it dipped straight down. Oh, if only we had some dynamite."

The boy's faith was just the spur the older man needed. "There's dynamite in a cavern just below here," he said. "Wait, we'll bring a stick and shoot it off."

The boy secured the instrument and took it to a place of safety.

"We'll have to make a long fuse," the man told the lad. "We don't want to take any chances with flying rock." Then he looked at the sun. "We ought to get back to the cabin in half an hour. I'll time it for about then."

This was done and then the two scrambled back down the rocks. How Gordon hoped the fire of the fuse would not be extinguished. Too, he hoped the

explosion would not take place before they reached the girls least they should be too greatly frightened.

* * * * *

During the absence of the man and boy, Virginia glanced often at her watch. She did want to see Gordon before she left to thank him for having procured her pack animal and to urge him to bring his sister to V. M. before returning to Douglas. She was sure that Malcolm would wish her to do so. But the afternoon was wearing away and, as they did not return, the girl at last arose saying: "I fear that we cannot wait longer." Then to the little mother, whose expression was much happier than when the visitors had arrived, she said, "Tell Mr. Wallace how sorry I am, not to have seen him this time, but I shall come again and often, and do remember, dear Mrs. Wallace, the V. M. Ranch house is large and if you run out of water in a few days, as you fear, I want you all to come to us until your cistern can be refilled."

There were tears of gratitude in the eyes of the frail woman. "I don't understand why it is," she said, "but now that you are here, Miss Virgie, I feel confident that all will be well, somehow."

They were out in the plateau-like dooryard and each girl had a horse by the bridle which was lucky,

when a deafening report like thunder boomed through the mountains.

"W-what was that?" Betsy cried in alarm, but Mrs. Wallace at once quieted their fears, for it was a sound she had often heard. "It's my Peter dynamiting for water," she said sadly. "But he won't find it. He never has." But little Peter whose eyes had been afire with enthusiasm has raced toward the canon bed and was seen waving and beckoning frantically. "Ma," he shouted, "I hear it. I'm as sure as anything that I hear water."

The girls listened and far up in the canon they heard a rushing sound that came nearer and nearer, then they heard something else. A shout of triumph, then a man and boy appeared and in the face of the inventor was light, an inner radiance of great joy.

He seemed to see no one but the wife he loved. Going straight toward her, with arms outstretched, he cried, "Molly, Molly, little girl! We've succeeded at last, you and I! Thank God your days of privation are over." Then turning to the lad he said, "But I can't call it all my invention. It was your thought that perfected it. I'll share with you." But the boy exclaimed, "Mr. Wallace, you alone are the inventor of that instrument. It would have been only a matter

of time before you thought to make the slight change that I suggested."

Then, although it seemed as though they just must stay to rejoice with their friends, Virginia was reminded by the lowness of the sun that she must start on the homeward way.

Annette and Gordon decided to remain in their present camp until the morrow. Then, although they would like nothing better than to visit V. M., the lad decided that he did not care to chance being stuck again in the sand and so he accepted Virginia's advice that he start out for Slater's Ranch early the next day.

"Mr. Slater is the richest man on the desert. You will have no trouble reaching his place," the girl assured him, "and from there into town is one of the best roads anywhere to be found as he keeps it up himself, or rather he has the peons in his employ constantly working on it." Then, holding out her hand to Annette, Virg said, "If your father is not ready to return East, we shall be glad to have you and Gordon visit us. If you will send us word, we will come for you in our car."

Two hours later, when the girls were dismounting near the corral at V. M., Betsy said, "Well, wasn't that all just like a story book adventure?" Then go-

ing to the pack horse, she patted him as she laughingly said, "And, although he doesn't know it, Old Stoic was the hero."

CHAPTER XI.

LETTERS OF INTEREST.

THE girls had reached home just in time, for hardly had they removed their sombreros when there arose a shouting without and a pounding of horses' feet.

"Good, the boys are back," Babs cried running to throw open the wide front door.

"Ohee, what a bulging mail bag," Betsy who had closely followed shouted gleefully. "There must be a million letters or more in it."

Malcolm swung from his tired horse and giving it a friendly slap, bade it go to the corral with its companions. Lucky and Slim, as he knew, would attend to its needs.

"We had a close call." Malcolm tossed his sombrero on the table, placing the mail bag beside it, then sank wearily in his favorite grandfather chair.

"What happened?" Virg inquired with interest. "Did that wild steer try to lead a stampede even with the drag on?"

"No, not that," her brother replied. "The poor creature seemed to have lost all desire to make a break for freedom. The close call was that when we drove the herd into the corral at the station, Mr. Wells came running up and said that he had just received a wire that the cars were to be taken on by a freighter that was due to arrive two hours sooner than scheduled, and didn't we work though.

"Then was the time the young steer might have made trouble had he but known. However, he didn't attempt it, but walked up into his prison as meekly as a sheep would have done." Then the boy laughed, "I suppose you'll think I'm foolish, but I certainly had a decided impulse at that moment to give him his freedom. It came over me how I would rejoice, were I in his place, if I once again found myself roaming where I would, out on the range with only the blue sky above me and the distant mountains for walls. Luckily the freighter came along before I had carried out my sentimental inclination, else our check would have been that much less, Virg, when it comes from Chicago."

Margaret, remembering what Virginia had said about hating to raise cattle just to have their freedom taken from them, realized that something of the same sentiment was in the heart of the brother,

although he had not fully realized it as the girl had.

"You look just too weary for words, Malcolm," Megsy said, leaping up from the window seat. "I'm going to make you some lemonade."

"Make enough for Lucky too, will you? Slim won't need any. He'll be dead to the world before you could get a lemon squeezed. He hasn't had on hour's sleep in two nights and a day."

"I'll help." Babs skipped by the side of her friend kitchenward.

"And while you're gone, I'll sort the mail." Virginia was emptying the contents of the leather pouch out on the long library table as she spoke.

Betsy watched eagerly. Suddenly she pounced on a large envelope addressed in a boy's hand writing. "It's from Cousin Bob, sure certain! I wonder if they're still quarantined. If so I 'spect this letter has been—what do you call it—fumigated."

"Two for Babs and two for me and not one for Megsy. That's too bad. I hope she will not feel left out," the youngest said, but Virg glanced up smilingly. "No indeed! Margaret is too generous and loving to ever feel neglected or left out. That is a form of selfishness. Then, more-over, all of Megsy's home people are right here, for, you know,

Betsy, she belongs to us. Malcolm is her guardian and I am her adopted sister."

"I hear a jingle approaching," Malcolm rose as the little pitcher bearer entered the room. He went forward ostensibly to carry it, but he took the opportunity to say softly, "I'm mighty glad my little ward is home again."

The flush which always mounted to the quiet girl's cheeks when this lad addressed her made her unusually pretty, but, as yet Malcolm had given it no thought. Virg had been the only girl he had ever known intimately and he supposed a certain reserve, which Margaret surely had, was responsible for the pretty flush.

"Any mail for me?" Babs was following with a tray on which were five tumblers.

"Two letters and both from boys or I miss my guess." Betsy was peering at the letters that lay side by side on the table.

"Then it is easy to know who they are from." Babs having passed the tumblers, picked them up and looked at them curiously. "This one is from dear old brother Peyton. "Then lifting an eager face she addressed her hostess. "Virg, I hope you won't think I'm lacking in appreciation of your hospitality if I say that I'd like to ride over to my

brother's ranch tomorrow. I've made you a real long visit."

"Three days isn't an eternity!" Betsy put in, but Megsy said: "It seems like one sometimes, when one is separated from home folks."

"You are right," Virg said, slipping a loving arm around the waist of the pretty friend who was sometimes called "The Dresden China girl." "We would love to have you stay longer with us, but I know you must be ever so eager to see Peyton." To herself the thought came, unbidden. "And so too am I." Then to her brother. "Why isn't Peyton here Malcolm? I thought surely he would be at the train to meet us with you."

The boy drank the lemonade gratefully before he replied. "I don't know, sister. I have been expecting to hear from him for a week. I did hear in a round-about way, that is one of Mr. Slater's cowboys passing V. M. last Friday week, stopped and took dinner with us. He said Peyton was having some trouble with his Mexican herders and didn't think best to leave them, although he was inclined to believe that a new one, who had recently arrived, might prove more trustworthy than the others had. But suppose you read your letter, Babs. That may tell us what you want to know."

It did, for in it Peyton told his sister that he had deeply regretted not having been at the station and then he related his reason, which was much the same as that which had been reported by the Slater cowboy.

But it was the last part of the letter which caused a stir in the little group.

"Much as I want to see you, dear sister, I'm going to ask you to remain at V. M. a short time longer or until I am sure whether or no there is going to be an outbreak among these Mexican herders. I am writing Virginia today to ask her to permit my little sister to be her guest a few days, perhaps a week longer. By that time I will know how much I can rely on my new overseer. You understand, Sis, I wouldn't want to ride over to V. M. and find, when I return, that these peons had driven my prize cattle across the border, nor would I want you and your friends to come here until I am sure that my herders are not of the bandit class.

"I hope you *are* disappointed, however, for selfishly I very much want my sister to come and open up the old house that she is to make into a home for her loving brother. PEYTON."

Virginia looked at Malcolm with an expression of anxiety. "Do you feel that Peyton is in any real

danger?" she asked. "If an outbreak of any kind should occur, I mean."

"No, I think not," Malcolm replied. Then Virg read her own little letter from Peyton whom she had once known as "Trusty Tom," but that former time was never referred to by any of them.

Megsy noticed that her adopted sister did not read aloud her letter from the brother of Barbara, and she believed that she knew why. It was not hard for even a casual observer to notice how sincerely the lad admired Virginia.

"Well, then that's settled," the hostess smiled lovingly at Babs. "Now we may keep with us a certain little girl whom we all love." "Why Barbara," Margaret then exclaimed as she noted a look of real concern on the pretty face, "what has Benjy written to make you seem so troubled? Has he found his mother worse?"

"He didn't know when he wrote this. It's just a few lines that he scribbled at the station in Red Riverton. You know he expected his brother Harry Wilson to meet him, and he wasn't there but his own horse had been sent for him. Benj is just ever so sure that means his mother is not so well. I do hope she will live. I never knew two boys to care more for a mother than they do."

"She is such a lovable, motherly woman," Virginia said earnestly. "Everyone who knows her, loves her. She always reminds me of a hen with a brood and even when the chickens are away, she is sort of spreading her wings with a welcome for any one in trouble who needs their comforting shelter, but it's nearly a year now that she has not been well."

"It's too bad that Harry doesn't seem to care to marry. If only Mrs. Wilson had a nice daughter to take the responsibility of home-making for a time, she could get a real rest."

Virginia astonished the others by saying, "Girls, surely you know that Harry does care for someone, but I'm afraid his mother would never willingly accept that someone for a daughter," Margaret said. "I, too, have felt sure that Harry cares for our wonderful Winona, as who, knowing her well, does not. She is one of the noblest characters I have ever met, and I know you think so too, Virg."

"Indeed I do," was the emphatic reply, "but one can understand how a mother might feel that a member of the Papago tribe would not be a suitable wife for her idolized son, but Winona would. They are more nearly kin, mentally and—and what

shall I say, in their love for the wide spaces of the desert, than any two I ever knew. You know Harry likes nothing better than to ride far away into the mountains studying the rocks and trying to read the messages of the ages in the different formations. Had he been able to leave home, he would have studied along those lines. Of course he is, even now, and what is more, our Winona is the very first girl who has ever appealed to him as a companion."

"Isn't it about time Winona finished that course of practical nursing that she was taking when she left us at boarding school?" It was Barbara who asked the question.

Virg nodded, then for the first time glanced at the second letter that she held. "Oh, good, this is from our Winona and since it was written on the train, she may be in her walled-in village home this very minute."

"May we all hear what she has written?" Babs asked.

"Of course," Virginia made herself comfortable on the window seat and then began to read. Malcolm, having excused himself, had retired to his own room for a much needed nap.

Dear White Lily:

At last I am homeward bound glad, deep in the heart of me, that I have learned a way to be of real service to my father's people, who, having lost faith in their old Medicine Man, had no one to whom they could take their little ones when they were hurt or ill.

I shall be there in two days, and, dear friend, I am not alone. With me is a comrade of my childhood, but I must tell you how it all happened.

One day when I went on duty, I found in the ward much excitement for a lad who was being called brave had been brought in and no one knew who he was. He was too exhausted to be conscious it seemed, for he had no real illness and so could not tell about himself.

The story was that in one of the city tenements a plague broke out which terrorized the neighborhood. Many became ill and those who were not strong died. It was so terrible a plague that few volunteered to help. Kind old Doctor Quinton gave his services and risked his life but alone he could do little. It was when he was completely worn out that this youth, who said that he was a medical student, volunteered to take the place of the good doctor while he took a much needed rest. Nor

would the lad leave his post when the older physician returned. They were too much occupied with real service to ask who he might be or from where he had come, but, at last, he too had succumbed, not to the plague but to weariness and they had brought him to the hospital.

I listened to the story and said that I would like to see the lad who had been willing to sacrifice his life for humanity.

White Lily, when I saw him, so thin and tired, lying on a cot in the ward, I knew him at once. It was Fleet Foot, one of the Papago boys who accompanied the kindly missionary who had taken three of our lads as you recall, to a school for Indian boys. I had not seen him since that long ago day, but he had changed little.

You, White Lily, will know what finding Fleet Foot meant to me, for is he not one of my father's people? I cared for him as tenderly as a sister might. Then the good doctor took him to his country home, that he might grow strong away from the noise of the city, but, when I had finished my course, Fleet Foot wished to return with me to our village and so together we are now nearing the end of our long journey. Will you not soon ride north

to our village and remain with me as long as you wish.

My friendliest thoughts I send to Margaret and Barbara if they are with you.

Your

WINONA.

At the close of the letter, the four girls were all thinking the same thing but it was the quiet Margaret who voiced it. "Poor Harry!" she said. "For of course this Papago lad, who is of her own people, will be the one Winona will love and eventually marry."

"I shall be sorry if this is true," Virginia remarked, "for Harry Wilson is so unlike other boys. He may never again find just the companion he wishes."

Then, as the dinner gong was sounding, the girls sprang up to hastily remove their khaki suits and don their house-dresses.

Meanwhile what of the neighbors farther north?

CHAPTER XII.

BENJY ARRIVES HOME.

IN the meantime when Benjy Wilson left the train at Red Riverton, he glanced about anxiously hoping that his brother Harry would be there to meet him. He had been the only passenger to descend to the platform and, almost at once, the station master hurried up to him to say that his brother had been in a few days before and had told him to keep on the watch-out for Benjy. "He said he mightn't be able to get in to meet you an' if he didn't, you'd find yer little horse Clipper over to the stables waitin' for yo'." Then the kindly man searched in the pockets of his blue denim coat and drew from one of them a letter. "Likewise he left this for you to sorto' explain things."

"Thank you, Mr. Hendrix. I'll go at once after Clipper," the boy said with a break in his voice, which drew from the sympathetic old man the query. "Yo' ma wan't any worse last yo' heard,

was she? Hal was in a hurry t'other day, I didn't get to ask."

"I'm afraid mother isn't very well," then fearing that he would cry from dread and loneliness, (never before had his older brother failed to meet him), the lad picked up his bags and hurried away toward the stables that were just beyond the station.

The boy naturally happy and optimistic was sadly troubled. The pony was glad indeed to see his young master and showed it in every way that he could.

It was not until the town had been left behind and Benjy was riding on a desert trail that he opened the letter which the station master had given him. With tear dimmed eyes he read:

"Dear Ben,

"I have not wanted to worry you needlessly and I have not been sure, (even now I am not sure), that there is real need for alarm, but I decided that I must warn you before you arrive, that you may be prepared for a great change in our mother's appearance. She was strong and well when you left eleven months ago, but now she is frail and wearies at the least exertion. I am telling you, not to

frighten you, (for it may merely mean that our mother is growing older or that she needs a complete rest), but I want you to be prepared for the change so that you will not exclaim about it when you arrive. It would be a great shock to our father, who, (perhaps because it has come so gradually), seems as yet unconscious of it. In mother's own brave, cheerful way, she hides it from him. When he comes home each night, weary from a hard day's work on the ranch, she is always at the head of the table, with her bright smile, and a good supper is waiting. Of late I have managed to ride home an hour earlier each night that I might help to prepare it.

"The one thing which has prevented my being greatly worried is mother's own attitude in the matter. She insists that there is nothing radically wrong; that she is merely tired, as one often is in the spring, and she laughingly, said last night: 'When little Benjy comes home, I'm going to play fine lady for a fortnight. Then you will see how well and strong I will be.'

"Ben, old pal, don't take this letter too much to heart, but I do think best to have you prepared for the change in the mother who is our all. If I were sure that I could get to the station to meet you,

would not have written this. I'll be there if I can possibly make it.

"Your brother, HAL."

But he hadn't been there.

As the boy rode along over the hard sand trail he thought of his quiet, dependable brother, who was so like their mother.

"Hal would have come if he could possibly have made it," he said with a half sob, as he realized the probable meaning of his older brother's absence.

"He never promised to do a thing in all his life but that he did it." Then the lad's thoughts returned to his little boyhood, when he had learned that the older brother's word could be trusted unfailingly.

"If Hal promised to make a kite or whittle a top on the first stormy day that we were shut in, he never forgot it, never tried to get out of it. Quite the contrary, Hal would be the first to say: 'Bring along your kite materials, little Ben. This is the day I promised I'd make one for you.'

"I'm going to be just like him," Benjy thought. "Mother is right. The man you want for a friend is the one you can trust."

The first half of the ride was over level desert

trails that had been beaten hard by cattle and horses, but farther on the way grew rough and rocky and there was a high rugged mountain range to be crossed, for, on the other side, lay the wide, sheltered valley belonging to the Wilson ranch.

Reaching the water-hole about noon, Benjy dismounted to permit his horse to drink.

Again in the saddle, he petted the beautiful pony's head. "Clipper, old pal," he said in a tone of sympathetic understanding, "I'm sorry to ask you to climb High Pine Mountain trail without giving you a chance to rest before we start upgrade, but I'll have to do it this time. I'll make it up to you, though, old pal, you see if I don't."

The pony seemed pleased to feel his young master's caress. He tossed his head, looked back over his shoulder and whinnied a reply. It was at that moment that the horse stepped on a rolling stone, scrambled madly to keep his foothold, stepped off the narrow, ascending trail and rolled with his rider into a shallow ravine. The fall had been but slight and Benjy leaped to his feet unhurt, but Clipper arose with more difficulty, and when he attempted to walk he limped and held his right forefoot as though it pained him.

Poor Benjy felt as though everything was

against him, but, just at that moment he seemed to see his dear mother's face and to hear her say as he so often had, "Benjy, Boy, courage wins."

"I know it, mother," the lad replied aloud with a half sob, and putting one arm around the pony's neck he choked back the tears that had tried to come, as he said, "I'm awfully sorry you're hurt, Clipper. I ought to have let you rest for a while at the water-hole. I guess we'll have to keep going somehow, but I won't ride you. If you don't have to carry a load, don't you think you can climb the trail, old pal?"

Clipper, looking at his young master, whinnied again, but, though he tried he could not walk without pain.

Just at that moment, Benjy heard a pounding of horses' feet. At first he thought it might be a herd of the small wild ponies that sometimes were seen near the mountains, but as he waited and watched around the jutting rocks there appeared a tall Indian lad seated on a pony, leading another that he had evidently just captured from a wild herd and followed by a third small horse.

Benjy climbed high on a rock and halooed at the top of his voice but the rider was going in the direction of the Indian village and away from Benjy.

Again the lad shouted but each second took the galloping horses farther and farther away from him.

Realizing that his voice could not be heard, the boy stood still watching the retreating figures and wondering what he ought to do, when suddenly he became tense and alert.

The wild pony that had been captured by the Indian lad made a sudden break for liberty. After rearing, it made a backward lunge and the rope that had been an improvised halter was torn from the hand of its captor; then snorting shrilly, the small horse galloped away and back toward the mountains.

The dangling rope, snapping this way and that at his heels, terrorized him, and, with eyes wild, he raced as he had never raced before. Plunging blindly, he headed directly for the spot where Benjy stood watching. In an instant the boy had formed a plan. Leaping behind a mesquite bush, he crouched waiting the oncoming horse. Nearer and louder came the swift pounding of hoofs, then, just as the lad had hoped, the dragging rope was flung toward him. The boy endeavored to seize it, but the pony had seen him, and, rearing on his hind feet, he whirled, but that very motion made him

captive, for the rope swung around the stout mesquite bush and held long enough for Benjy to make it fast.

Then the boy wisely ran out of reach of the wildly plunging horse, which enraged at his unexpected recapture, snorted and dragged so hard on the rope that Benjy feared the bush would be uprooted.

The Indian lad was galloping toward them at top speed, followed by the faithful pony. "Hold him if you can!" was the cry that reached Benjy's ears. It was English, which meant that the rider was either Strong Heart, or Fleet Foot of whom he had not heard.

A lasso whirled through the air as the rider neared. It coiled like a snake about the forefeet of the rearing pony and pulled him to the ground.

"What a beautiful little horse you have there," Benjy said by way of greeting.

The stoical Indian lad bowed. "I had none and so I have captured him for my own, but he would have been lost again if you had not made him fast."

Then he asked, "What is wrong with your pony?"

Benjy told in a few words about his great anxiety concerning his mother, of his eagerness to reach

her soon as possible and about poor Clipper's mishap.

The Indian lad lifted the hurt foot, and taking his soft leather belt, he wound it tightly about the strain. Rising, Fleet Foot, for it was that fine Indian lad, bade Benjy place his saddle on the horse that had been following, adding that he would take Clipper to the village and give him care. "He will be all right in a few weeks," the Indian lad said. "I hope so," Benjy replied, "Clipper and I have been pals ever since I was a little shaver."

Then, having thanked Fleet Foot the boy again started up the long hard trail.

It was nearly dusk when he reached the summit. Looking down into the valley, he could see the group of white-washed buildings that were home to him. With a sob he reached out both arms. "Mother! Mother!" he said, "I'm coming. I'll be with you soon now."

CHAPTER XIII.

MOTHER!

As Benjy neared his ranch home he saw that a dim light was burning in his mother's room. This confirmed his fears that the one he so loved was really ill. Urging his steed to a gallop, he was soon dismounting at the corral, where he left his pony. The front door quietly opened and his brother appeared. He advanced with outstretched hands.

"Hal," the young lad said, with a sob, "is our mother ill?"

"I don't know, Benny Boy," was the reply. "Mother insists that she is merely tired and that she is going to remain in bed until she is rested, and you must pretend that you believe her. It will be hard for you, fearfully hard, but it must be done. Come. Our mother has been listening all day. Just now she called to me and said: 'Son, go quickly and open the door. My little boy has come

home.' She knows that you are here and so we must not delay longer or she will think it strange."

Never before had the young lad been through so hard an ordeal. He longed to put his arms about his big, strong brother and sob out his dread and grief, but instead, he had to choke back his tears and enter the dimly lighted room with a smile.

"Little Ben," the woman on the bed called, with infinite love and tenderness in her voice.

"Mother mine," the lad replied as he sank on his knees and pressed his cheek against hers. Tears would come but in the dim light they were not seen and his voice sounded cheerful.

"Brother tells me that you are taking a week's rest. I am so glad. You have needed one for a long time and now Hal and I will show you what fine daughters we would have been, if we hadn't been sons."

Harry, standing at the foot of the bed was proud of his brother. Benjy had always been so loved and petted, (even he had given in to the younger lad sometimes when he thought it might be unwise), that he had feared Benjy might not be strong enough to rise to the emergency, but he was doing so bravely. In a voice that sounded natural to his mother, Benjy said: "I'm most starved, Mummie,

I hope your new cook can make pies and things as well as you can."

The older boy had noted a sudden anxious expression on the dear face, for the mother was reproaching herself for having remained in bed when her little Ben was coming home, hungry.

"Indeed, I can," Hal hastened to say: "You'll find the larder filled with the choicest viands."

Kissing the pale cheek, Benjy left the room, turning at the door to toss a kiss and send back a bright smile, but it was to his own room that he went. Throwing himself down on the bed, he sobbed and sobbed. There Hal found him ten minutes later. "I can't live without my mother," the younger boy said, "I can't! I can't!"

Harry put a comforting arm about his brother. "May heaven grant that we need not for many years to come."

Then placing a hand on each shoulder, he looked straight into his brother's eyes. "Benny boy," he said, "I'm counting on you. It's hard; well do I know how hard, but cheerful courage is all that our father and mother must see. I have been waiting for your return. Now I am going to ride to Red Riverton for a doctor. I will be back tomorrow morning early, if all goes well."

"Hal!" Benjy exclaimed, "you aren't going to take that long hard ride tonight. You know that it isn't safe to go through Red River mountain pass alone after dark."

"Even so, there must not be another moment's delay. I must go tonight. I want you to keep your door open. If our mother stirs, go to her."

"I won't try to sleep," the younger boy replied. "I do not waken easily. I'll sit up all night." Hal grasped his brother's hand to show his approval and then he was gone. It was the hardest night that Benjy Wilson ever lived through, but in it he left his heedless, selfish boyhood in which he had accepted all that his mother had done for him, as due, and realized that he, too, must share the burdens and responsibilities that came every day. When Hal returned at the grey of the next dawn, one glance at his tired brother assured him that his confidence in the younger boy had not been misplaced. Then followed a long half hour filled with anxiety of waiting while the kindly physician made a thorough examination of the little woman so loved by these two boys.

"Where's our father?" Benjy suddenly asked as he looked up from the fire on the hearth at which he had been thoughtfully gazing since the kindly

physician had entered their mother's room fifteen minutes before.

"Father went to visit the North camp last week and he has not yet returned," Harry said. "I am glad, for he does not know that our mother has given up trying to keep about. That of course would worry him greatly. I hope that she will be much better before he returns. Dad depends on mother so completely for his comfort and happiness that I fear he would collapse if he knew the truth, as, of course he must know it soon."

Again they were silent and it was still another quarter of an hour before the door opened. Both boys were on their feet at once eagerly scanning the face of the physician. His cheerful smile was encouraging.

"Lads," he said as he placed a hand on the shoulder of each, "your mother is not going to die. Mrs. Wilson has unwisely permitted a condition to exist for a long time which should have been corrected months ago. There are very few casualties resulting from the operation which your mother must undergo."

There was a sudden glad light in the face of the older lad.

"Doctor Warren," he said, "the hope you are

giving us is the greatest joy that has ever come into my life."

The elderly physician, gazing at the earnest faces, thought that he had never met finer boys. Worthy sons of a brave, courageous little mother.

"Now tell us what we are to do." The load of dread that had been crushing Harry's heart having been lifted, the lad was eager to be of active service.

"Your mother must remain in bed until we can build up her strength," the physician replied. "Perhaps for two weeks, and then we will take her to the Red Riverton hospital and have the slight operation performed, but, first of all I must procure a nurse."

The physician put his hands in his pockets and turning, gazed thoughtfully at the fire. "There is an epidemic in Red Riverton and I do not like to engage a nurse from there to care for your mother." Then he glanced up at Hal. "Do you know of anyone near here who would come?"

"I do," was Benjy's eager response. "Our good friend Winona will come, I am sure she will, Doctor Warren. She just received a diploma as a practical nurse from the Red Cross Hospital on the Hudson."

"Fine!" the physician replied. "How soon can we have her here? Where does she live?"

The reply brought a puzzled expression to the face of the doctor.

"An Indian maiden?" he said with a rising inflection. "I have heard of the Papagoes and that they are a remnant of a very superior tribe of red men, but I had not supposed that an Indian girl could possess the qualities required for a nurse. Are you quite sure that it would be wise to have her?"

Strange things happen, stranger than fiction. Before Hal could reply, there was the sound of horses' feet in the yard, and a moment later a light rapping on the front door.

Hal sprang to open it, and there stood the maiden about whom they had been talking, with little Red Feather at her side.

"Friend Harry," she said. "Fleet Foot told me that your mother is ill. I thought you might need me."

The lad stepped forward, his hand outstretched.

"We do indeed need you," he replied, his voice tense with emotion. Then turning to the older man he added. "Doctor Warren, this is Nurse Winona."

The physician was deeply impressed with the quiet dignity of the really beautiful Indian girl. Like all others, who knew her, the good man at first could not have told why he thought her beautiful.

Before entering the house, the maid turned and said a few words in the Papago tongue, then little Red Feather, without a word of farewell, mounted his small horse and rode away.

Doctor Warren asked to be permitted to speak alone with the young nurse, and the boys withdrew to prepare a lunch for both the newcomer and the physician who had a long and hard ride ahead of him.

After asking about the training which Winona had received at the Red Cross Hospital, Doctor Warren said:

"Your remuneration will be the same that would be given a nurse from Red Riverton."

Then it was that the older man knew why the Indian girl was beautiful. "It is a service of friendship that I came to offer," she quietly replied. "Will you tell me what I am to do?"

An hour later the physician left feeling sure that his directions would be carried out to the letter. He had learned that an Indian maiden could not

only be a sincere friend but also an intelligent nurse.

Before Doctor Warren departed he asked Harry to accompany him to the corral. As they walked together, the physician said: "From the conversation I have had with your nurse, I believe her to be very capable, and luckily, just before she left the East, she had the care of a little woman whose condition was the same as your mother's and so we will trust her to use her own judgment whenever she wishes to do so."

Mrs. Wilson who had supposed that she had not much longer to be with the little family she so loved, was overjoyed when she realized that she would soon be strong again.

She was lying in the darkened room when Harry entered a few moments after the doctor's departure. At his side she saw someone dressed in blue with white cap and apron. She was too weak to wonder from where the apparition had come, and so she accepted Winona's presence as a matter of course believing that she had accompanied the doctor from Red Riverton. Harry merely said, "Mother, this is your nurse."

The little woman held out a frail hand and smiled wanly, then she closed her eyes and rested. She was conscious all that day that she was being

tenderly cared for, and, toward evening when Benjy knelt at her side, in answer to her anxious query, he told his mother that the new nurse was also a fine cook. Mrs. Wilson who had wished that she was up that she might prepare the good things her younger son so liked, felt a sense of relief that did much toward restoring her needed strength.

Never once in the two weeks that followed did the little woman suspect that the slender dark-eyed girl who cared for her was the Indian maiden of whom she had heard. Winona, with her black hair coiled under her nurse's cap in her blue and white gown might easily have been taken for a French girl.

Harry, wishing his mother to learn to love Winona without prejudice had asked Benjy to address her merely as "Nurse."

At the end of a fortnight, Mrs. Wilson was strong enough to sit up. When Harry believed that his presence was no longer needed at home, he rode to the northern camp to tell his father what had happened. He was greatly relieved because he could now honestly say that all would be well.

This was not hard for the older man to believe, for on their return they found the little mother seated in the living room and beaming a welcome

when they opened the front door. From that day, she rapidly regained her strength, and, at the end of the fortnight, she was driven in a big comfortable car to Red Riverton. It was on that ride that Mrs. Wilson made a discovery which pleased her greatly. It was that her son, Harry, really cared for the girl who had nursed her so tenderly. How she knew this she could not have told, perhaps it was just a mother's intuition.

Another two weeks passed and the happy family was once more gathered in the ranch home. Mrs. Wilson was soon strong enough to walk about the house, and, the long weeks of anxiety having ended, the members of the household again went about their tasks in a natural manner. Benjy returned with his father to the North Camp and Harry asked Winona if she would like to ride with him to inspect a water-hole not far away. Mrs. Wilson had urged her to go, saying that for an hour she could get along nicely alone. It was during that hour that she learned the real identity of her nurse.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DEEP LOVE REVEALED.

MRS. WILSON sat in a big comfortable chair in front of the wide hearth on which a log that the boys had dragged down from the mountains, was cheerily burning. The frail woman smiled happily as she watched the flames. How wonderful it was to know that after all she was going to live, perhaps many more years to minister to her little family. In her heart there had been a secret fear for months that she was soon to leave them.

She leaned back among the pillows that her nurse had arranged so comfortably before she had departed for a short horse-back ride with Harry.

From where she sat Mrs. Wilson could look out of the window and watch the trail down which she would soon see the young people returning.

Then again she fell to dreaming. Perhaps she would live long enough to see both of her boys married, and it might be that in some future day she would be seated in front of this same fireplace watch-

ing another log burn and holding a wee grandchild. Tears sprang to her eyes as she pictured her beloved husband growing old with her and little ones playing about them.

This happy reverie was interrupted by the sound of approaching ponies. It might be the men from the North Camp for the nurse and Harry had not been gone long enough to be returning. She sat watching the picture framed by her window. As the hurrying hoof-beats neared, she guessed, and truly, that there were more than two ponies, for, down the part of the trail that she could see, single file, came six small, wiry horses. Instantly she knew that their riders were from the Indian village.

The little black-haired boy in the lead wore a red feather in the band about his head, and, at his side rode a tall, slender girl with a scarlet blanket about her shoulders. There were four others, but they were dressed in khaki. It was only by their black hair and dusty complexions that she knew that they, too, were Indians. Then it was that Mrs. Wilson recalled something which of late she had forgotten. It was that an Indian maiden from this same Papago village had been East to a fashionable boarding school with Barbara Wente, the fairy-like little girl who was so liked by Benjy.

Perhaps the Winona of whom she had heard, was the tall, graceful Indian maiden riding in the lead with the lad of the red feather, Mrs. Wilson thought, and then, idly, she wondered where they were going. Perhaps to some hunting camp farther north in the mountains.

She was not long left in doubt regarding the destination of the riders, for, almost as soon as they had passed from her vision, there came a rapping on the front door.

Harry had made her promise that she would not leave her chair and so she called, "come in," hoping that one among the strange visitors might be able to understand the language that she spoke.

The door opened at once and a tall young man with a clear, direct gaze stood before her. To the little woman's surprise, he spoke excellent English.

"Madame Wilson, I am Strong Heart, chief of the tribe of Papagoes. It is my wish to converse with my sister. One month ago Red Feather returned with the message that Winona was to remain with you and be your nurse."

There was a rush of conflicting emotions in the heart of the listener, and foremost among them was the sudden realization that her son, Harry, loved, really loved an Indian maiden. If her voice shook

a little as she replied, Strong Heart did not notice it for her words were friendly as they always were to any fellow-being.

"My very kind nurse then is your sister?" she inquired. "I have been too ill to wonder who she was or from where she came." Then, fearing that in some way this had lacked in graciousness, she added simply and sincerely: "Strong Heart, we all dearly love your sister. She has truly been an angel in our home."

And, even as she spoke, Mrs. Wilson knew that it was the truth. Harry loved Winona and so too did his mother. Then she directed the Indian lad to the water-hole toward which Winona and Harry had ridden, and, when the visitors were gone, she sat for a long time watching the fire and thinking: "My boy shall never know that I regret his choice, and yet, do I really regret it, for a nobler girl he could not have chosen."

In the meantime Winona and Harry had been riding at a canter. Then, letting their horses walk more slowly, they conversed quietly together. They spoke of his mother and Harry expressed to the dusky girl at his side his great appreciation of her services.

By now and then asking a question the lad per-

suaded Winona to talk about her year at school. She ended by telling of Fleet Foot and she described in glowing terms his deed of heroism. Harry Wilson, listening, believed that Winona cared for the Indian lad about whom she was talking, and, a few moments later he was convinced that his surmise had been correct.

Suddenly they had been halted by a whooping call from little Red Feather, and, turning in their saddles, they drew rein and waited for the Papagoes to ride up. Instantly Harry knew that the tall, arrow-straight youth, who whirled his pony about that he might speak to Winona, was the one of whom he had just heard.

They rode apart, somewhat, and for a time seemed unconscious of the presence of the others as they talked earnestly in low undertones.

Harry tried to be interested in a conversation with Strong Heart concerning the condition of water-holes at that time of the year, but now and then he found his gaze wandering in the direction of his mother's nurse while his thought assured him that Winona naturally would care more for one of her own people than for one of another race.

When the young Papagoes had ridden away toward the mountain trail which they would have to

cross to reach their walled-in village, the other two, after visiting the water-hole, returned to the Wilson ranch. Winona was in the lead and each was thoughtfully silent. As they neared the house Harry hastily hastened his pony and rode at the girl's side. She looked up with a smile so radiant that the lad was more than ever assured that her visit with Fleet Foot had brought her great happiness.

"Dear girl," he thought, "from now on I will try to think of her as I would of a sister. After all, mother will need one of her boys just to care for her." Aloud he said, "Winona, Ben and I have often wished we had a sister. You have been to all of us in our trouble what I believe she would have been. I hope you will come often to visit in our home."

The girl turned and looked at him frankly. "Thank you, Harry," she said, simply. It was then that Hal was convinced that the Indian girl had never thought of him other than a dear friend and companion.

When they reached the ranch house, Harry took both of the horses to the corral, while Winona quietly entered the living room, believing, and

truly, that she would find Mrs. Wilson dozing in her comfortable chair.

For a moment Winona stood gazing at the sweet face to which the color of health was slowly returning. Then, quietly, she tip-toed close and, bending, she lightly kissed the forehead beneath the soft gray hair.

She was not usually demonstrative, but, although even her dearest friend had never guessed it, there had always been in the heart of this Indian girl a yearning for that wonderful something that she had never had, the love of a mother.

When a few moments later the little woman opened her eyes it was to see her quiet nurse again in the neat blue and white uniform preparing the evening meal.

Harry came in and offered his services, which were accepted. Winona's manner, usually so reserved, seemed almost joyous.

"Friend of mine," she said, "I have a beautiful secret and I think I will tell it to you."

* * * * *

It was after the evening meal. Mrs. Wilson had been made comfortable for the night and the young people thought her asleep as they sat near the

hearth in the living room and spoke quietly together.

"You promised to tell me a beautiful secret," the lad said, a dread heavy at his heart. "May I hear it now?"

"Yes," the girl replied, turning her clear gaze toward him. "It is about Fleet Foot."

"I knew it," was the unexpected response, and Winona looked up inquiringly. "Why, how could you know it?" Then, as the lad did not answer, she continued: "This afternoon I told you about the kind, elderly physician in the East who was so pleased with Fleet Foot's spirit of a sacrifice, and how, when the lad was well enough to be moved from the hospital, Doctor Quinton took him to his country home in New Jersey, where he remained through the three lovely months of spring?"

Harry nodded. He could not understand why Winona was beginning her story in this way if the secret was what he believed it to be, that the Indian maiden and Fleet Foot cared for each other.

"Are you listening, Harry?" the girl asked, for the lad was gazing at the burning log with a far-away expression in his grey-blue eyes.

He turned and smiled at her. "Indeed I am,

Winona," he said, "I am greatly interested in what you have to tell me."

"So am I, greatly interested," the girl continued. "It is all like a beautiful poem, and yet, true. The summer home of this kind old physician is a picturesque log cabin in the midst of a pine wood just above a clear blue lake which Fleet Foot described as a wonderful mirror reflecting every fleecy white cloud that sailed above it by day and every star at night. When they first arrived at the cabin they heard singing somewhere among the pines, and then, skipping toward them came a gold-and-white fairy of a girl who was Sylvia, the granddaughter of Doctor Quinton. She was delighted because her 'dear old grand-dad,' as she called him, had brought a comrade, and, as the days passed, Fleet Foot learned to love this lassie who was so unlike—well, so unlike the Papago maidens.

"He called her 'Sunshine-on-a-Dancing-Brook.' Fleet Foot never spoke of his love, for he believed that the physician, much as he liked him, would not wish him to marry his granddaughter, the flower of his life, but when Fleet Foot came West, that little flower drooped, and then it was that Doctor Quinton learned that Sylvia cared for Fleet Foot, really cared, and now comes the wonderful part of

it all. Yesterday my friend had a letter from the elderly physician asking him to return to them if he really loved his little 'Sunshine-on-a-Dancing-Brook.' Fleet Foot came to say good-bye, for tomorrow he departs."

There was a glad light in the eyes of the listener.

"Winona," Harry said, more impulsively than he had ever before spoken, "I thought you cared for Fleet Foot and I was sad, for I do so want to try to win your love."

Winona did not reply at once, and, as there was only the light of the fire about them, the lad could not tell by her expression what she might be thinking.

When the girl spoke, she said: "Harry, your mother wants you to marry one of your own people."

It was then that they heard a soft voice calling to them, "Come to me, both of you."

They entered the dimly lighted room and stood by the bedside. The little woman smiled up at them and in her eyes there was a new tenderness. Holding out a frail hand, she said: "I have always wanted a little girl, Winona. Won't you be my beloved daughter?"

The young people knelt and she placed their

hands together. "Now," she said, "my dearest wish has been fulfilled. My older son is to have just the wife that I would choose for him."

CHAPTER XV.

A MYSTERY AT LAST.

A week after the arrival of Peyton's letter, suggesting that his sister remain longer, another came with quite a different request. In it the lad assured them all of his great faith in his new overseer.

"Trujillo seems to have complete control of his helpers. In fact, at times, I think that they treat him reverentially, which, of course I cannot understand, but I am now confident that there will be no uprising among the peons and so Babsie I do hope that Virginia and your other girl friends will come to Three Cross and make you as long a visit as you have made them, longer indeed, if they can be spared."

"Oh, Virg, will you go, you and Betsy and Megsy? I'd so love to have you all with me when I open up that old house. You know Peyton has been living in one of the small adobes, not wishing to open up the big place until I came. Virg, you've

been there time and again. I remember how Mrs. Dartley called you her 'Angel of Mercy.' "

"As everyone else does on the desert or anywhere," Margaret put in.

Virg laughed. "And all because I rode over to Three Cross one day and applied first aid measures when the Dartley baby was cutting teeth."

"What did you do?" Betsy inquired.

"Rubbed the poor little gums with a sterilized thimble till the wee teeth poked through," Virginia replied.

Barbara was eager to be away and so the very next morning, while it was still cool, they rode to the North, promising Malcolm to return in a fortnight.

Peyton, expecting them, had ridden a few miles southward to meet them and joyous was the reunion between the brother and sister, but it was at Virginia's side that the lad was soon riding.

The old ranch house which they were approaching (and which Mr. Wente had purchased from the Dartleys), was one of the most picturesque on the desert. It was a large Spanish adobe built around an inner court over which were hanging balconies. The windows were barred; wide verandas surrounded it on all sides, and each room had

a door opening thereon. A clump of cottonwood trees grew around a water-hole in the door-yard. The house was very old and in some places the adobe walls were crumbling.

Mr. Dartley had been too poor to repair it, and Peyton, since he had acquired it, had been too much occupied with the cattle he had purchased to attend to renovating the house.

"What a wonderful old place it is," Virginia said as she smiled at the lad.

"It looks wonderful to me," he replied, "because I keep hoping that someday it will be your home as well as mine."

Before the girl could reply, Babs galloped up alongside. "Oh Virg," she said with sparkling eyes. "I just know I'm going to love this old place. If only there were blossoming vines climbing over the veranda, wouldn't it be beautiful?"

It was hard for the maiden addressed to think of vines just then, but she smilingly replied, "Yes, dear, I am sure they would. Your well is never dry and anything will grow on the desert if it is well watered."

"Oh Virg, are you making a pun?" Betsy Clossen called as she and Margaret rode up within hearing.

Virginia laughed as she gaily replied, "Maybe I am. I don't feel accountable just at this particular moment."

Peyton glanced at the flushed pretty face of the speaker and wondered why Virginia seemed confused but he did not have another moment alone with her for they were entering the door-yard where a cowboy, apparently a Mexican of the better class, advanced to take their ponies.

"Who is your new acquisition, brother?" Barbara asked as she gazed with interest at the graceful Mexican lad, who, having made almost courtly salutations to the young ladies, had, without speaking, turned and led the horses toward the corral.

Peyton remonstrated. "Don't you know enough about the ways of the desert, little sister, not to ask who anyone is? I really am as ignorant concerning the past of my faithful head rider Trujillo as you are. He blew in one day last March—literally blew in! We were having one of those terrible hurricanes which frequently visit us in the spring. For the first time since I had acquired 'The Three Cross Ranch' I was desperately dismal. The only capable cowboy I had, departed to become overseer elsewhere, and I was left with the shiftless Mexican peons who knowing my ignorance, took advantage

of it. Then, as though that were not trouble enough, a blinding sandstorm came, and I feared my newly acquired herd would be driven by it over into Mexico. It was in the midst of all this that I heard a pounding on the front door. Opening it, I let in a whirl of wind and sand and also this Mexican lad, Trujillo.

"I was desperate for companionship just then, and, although he did not speak English, he could understand my Spanish and I told him my woes. When the tale was finished, the sandstorm had passed. Silently the stranger arose. I believed that he was leaving without a word of gratitude for the refreshment I had given him. I watched him mount his weary horse and ride down to the bunk house. He called to the peons and they gathered about him. I saw them bring him a fresh mount and then they all rode away with him toward the South. I thought dismally that perhaps he had come to take them away from me, but, toward evening I heard them all returning. They had rounded up my frightened, scattering herd, and, before dark, the cattle were safe in the five-acre enclosure. Then the stranger came to say adios, but I persuaded him to remain until morning and he is still here."

"I believe there is a mystery about your Tru-

jillo," Betsy Clossen said. "Wouldn't it be interesting if we could find out what it is?"

The other girls laughed.

"Betsy is always on a still hunt for a mystery," Babs told her brother, as they walked toward the house. "We call her Detective Betsy in school, but, as yet, she has never discovered one worth the effort to unravel. School girls are not mysterious."

"Personally, I think one might find a mystery in this old house," Margaret said. "If walls had tongues as well as ears what interesting stories it could tell."

Peyton led the way within, and the young people, standing in the long living room which extended across the entire front of the house, uttered varying exclamations of delight.

"It's just the sort of a room one sees on the screen when the home of a Spanish Don is being pictured, isn't it?" Margaret said. "The original owners were Spanish, were they not?"

"Yes," Peyton replied, "Don Carlos Spinoza was a wealthy Spaniard, who became a political outlaw during one of the frequent uprisings in Mexico City. He remained in hiding with his family in the mountains near here for some time and finally built this house. This interesting old furniture belonged

to him. Later, when his friends were in power, he returned and rescued the family paintings and other treasures from their home in Mexico. However, after a year or two of isolation the Donna and their beautiful daughter became discontented and yearned once more for the gay life to which they had been accustomed. Don Carlos had many political enemies in Mexico, and so he had no desire to return. At last he sold this place for a small sum to Mr. Dartley and left for Spain."

"Mrs. Dartley did not appreciate this mahogany furniture," Virginia told them. "She often said she wished that she could make a bonfire of it all and buy some nice, new chairs that didn't have carvings to catch the dust."

"But she could not because the old furniture and family paintings were only left here temporarily, or so the story goes, but years have passed and no one has returned to claim them."

Virginia smiled. "Poor Mrs. Dartley looked strangely out of place in the midst of all this grandeur. She was a dear and ever so kind hearted, but I often thought that the Dons and Donnas looking down from the walls must have wondered what had happened and how they chanced to be living with folk who dressed in gingham instead of silk.

But they didn't see her often, for this room was usually left in darkened solitude, for the Dartley family lived almost entirely in the kitchen."

Suddenly Barbara inquired: "Betsy, why are you staring so hard at the painting of that grand old Donna? Does the picture fascinate you?"

Betsy laughed at them over her shoulder. "You know I have an active imagination," she replied, "and so you will not be surprised to hear me say that I believe I have met this fine lady somewhere."

"That would be impossible, my dear girl," Margaret protested, "for that Donna could not possibly be living now."

"I do believe that the lovely dark-eyed Senorita in this picture is her daughter," Virginia said, "and here she is again older and with a little girl standing by her side and a beautiful dark-eyed baby boy on her lap. It really is too bad that the descendants of the Spinoza family cannot have these paintings in their gallery wherever they are. In Spain, I suppose, as they have never been heard from since they departed so long ago."

"Girls," Babs said, "it is growing dusky in here, which reminds me that the sun will soon set and that the beds are not made and that I, for one, am ravenously hungry."

"Lead us to your culinary department, Peyton, and we will spread out our picnic lunch. Good, here comes the cowboy, Trujillo. Now Betsy, you begin solving the mystery, but don't let the poor lad know that you are trying to unravel him," Virginia cautioned, as they entered the more modern kitchen which, since it faced toward the west, was bright with the late afternoon sunshine. At one end was the great black range, which had been the pride of the good housekeeper, who so recently lived there.

Across the other end was the long dining table and near the windows were plains wooden rockers which Mrs. Dartley had made comfortable with soft cushioned seats, covered with bright colored materials, for this had been the home part of the house for her little family.

The solemn grandeur of the other rooms had depressed the rancher's wife and she once confided to Virginia that the life-sized portraits hanging around the walls gave her the shivers. "Those painted folks all have beady black eyes and they watch every move I make," she had said. "It doesn't matter which part of the room I walk to, their eyes turn and keep a spyin' at me. It's too spooky a place to live in. I don't step a foot in

that room, month in and month out, if I can help myself."

It was partly because of this uncanny closed room that Mrs. Dartley had been so eager to have her husband sell the Three Cross Ranch that she might return to the Middle-West and to the farmer folk whose pleasant houses were all furnished in the simple way that she liked.

During the evening meal, Peyton asked many questions of the girls concerning their year at school. Margaret, Virginia and Babs chattered of one thing and another. Suddenly Virg, wondered why the usually loquacious Betsy Clossen was keeping so still. She looked across the table and saw that the would-be young detective seemed to be deep in thought. Now and then she would glance at the Mexican cowboy who sat opposite. Since he did not understand the English language, the girls did not attempt to converse with him, although Peyton frequently addressed Trujillo in Spanish.

Virg smiled to herself, for she guessed, and rightly, that Betsy was trying to imagine a mystery about the really good-looking, dark young stranger—that she might solve it.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MYSTERIOUS ROOM.

THE boys went down to the corral after supper and the girls being left alone decided to see what the long darkened front room looked like at night.

Virg, in the lead, was carrying a burning candle.

"Leave the kitchen door standing open until we have lighted one of these hanging lamps," she said.

Babs did this and they had advanced to the middle of the room when a breeze from somewhere swept through, blew out the tiny flame on the candle and closed the kitchen door with a bang. Babs uttered a shrill scream.

"Be still girls," Virg said in her calm voice. "There is nothing to be afraid of even if we are in the dark. Now all of you stand here where you are. I know this house better than any of the rest of you and so I will grope my way back and reopen the kitchen door"

Betsy Clossen's detective instinct was on the alert. She seized Virg by the arm as she whispered,

"There's something queer about this. The light in the kitchen must also have been put out, otherwise we would see it shining under the door, wouldn't we?"

"I should think so," Virg said slowly as she paused, then she added "even so, I will investigate. The boys are near. If we are frightened, we will call them."

She groped her way toward the wall, where she believed she would find the kitchen door. "Good!" she told the waiting group. "Here it is." But, when she turned the knob, the door would not open. She pushed and pulled, but all to no effect.

"Please call Peyton," Megsy implored. "I have the chilly shivers going up and down my spine. I just know this house is haunted and that the haunt is angry because we came, and wishes to scare us away."

"Girls," Betsy Clossen said in a low voice, "I believe that I understand it all. It's that mysterious Trujillo. He has some object in living here, I'll wager, and he fears that this object, whatever it is, will be defeated if so many girls are around to watch him, and so he is trying to scare us away. Well, I for one shall stay."

Virginia's laugh from out of the dark sounded

merry and natural. Then, just at that moment, having found the right knob, she opened the kitchen door and a flood of light from the big lamp fell upon the huddled group.

Margaret and Babs darted for the home-like kitchen as though it were a harbor of safety but Betsy Clossen remained in the darkness. "Virg," she called, "let the other girls stay there and you bring one of the small lamps that won't blow out easily and let's look around and see where the wind came in that blew out the candle and slammed the door."

"Don't think that we feel offended, Betsy," Margaret called as she sank down in a big comfortable kitchen rocker. "I have no yearning to unravel mysteries. You and Virg may have all of the honor and all of the shivers."

"Ditto!" Babs said as she sat in another of the rockers and drew it closer to the stove. Virginia having found a lantern, lighted it and again entered the long silent front room. Having closed the kitchen door, she turned to speak to Betsy, but, to her surprise, the other girl was nowhere to be seen.

Believing that her friend had hidden, just to mystify her, Virginia went about the room holding her lantern high and peering behind the big, heavily-carved mahogany furniture. At first she was in

no way alarmed, but, when each nook and corner had been searched, she stood still, troubled indeed. She had not wanted to call the name of her friend for she knew that the two more timid girls in the kitchen would hear and become alarmed, but, at last, there being no other alternation she said, "Betsy, where are you?" Then she stood listening, but the moaning of the wind down the chimney was the only sound that she could hear.

What could have become of Betsy? Perhaps she had stepped out of the front door and was hiding on the porch, but, when Virg turned to look, she saw that the heavy wooden doors were barred on the inside.

The usually calm Virginia was becoming troubled and she was indeed glad to hear Peyton entering the kitchen. She would have to tell them all now, and have them join in the search for Betsy who had so mysteriously disappeared.

"Virg, what is the matter? You look as though you had seen a ghost," Megsy exclaimed, as she sprang up from her comfortable rocker when she saw Virginia returning from the dark, silent front room.

Peyton had just entered the kitchen. Having blown the light out in his lantern, he was hanging

it on its peg, but upon hearing Margaret's startled exclamation, he whirled and looked at Virg. He noted that she was very pale and seemed greatly agitated.

This was indeed unusual, for as long as he had known this calm girl, she had been mistress of every situation that had arisen. He took a quick step toward her, fearing that she would faint.

Babs, too, had risen. Virg spoke almost incoherently: "Betsy, she's lost—disappeared," she told them.

Peyton protested in amazement. "But Virg, how could Betsy be lost. She has been right here in the house all of the time, hasn't she?"

Then Virg told the lad just what had happened.

"I do not wonder that Trujillo has aroused Betsy's curiosity," Peyton remarked. "For that matter, if it were not the custom of the desert to ask no questions, I believe that I, myself, would be tempted to ask him who he really is and from whence he came. He is greatly the superior of the Mexican peons that I have working here and they obey his slightest word as though they too recognized his superiority. He seems content to be my foreman, for he has said nothing about leaving. In fact he seldom speaks. He replies graciously in perfect Spanish when I address

him, but says almost nothing of his own accord. But Virg, what has all this to do with Betsy? How can she have disappeared?"

"It certainly is mysterious," that maiden replied. "Not ten minutes ago we were all in the front room. Betsy said that she wanted to see what it would look like when those queer hanging lamps were lighted."

"I said we ought not to go," Babs interrupted, tremulously, "and now, if anything has happened to Betsy we'll—"

"Why, sister, nothing could happen to her right here in our own house," Peyton declared in a tone of conviction. Then to Virg, he added: "Please tell me the rest of your story."

"As Babs says, she and Megsy were in favor of remaining in the well-lighted and far more comfortable kitchen, but Betsy begged and so we all went with her, carrying only a lighted candle. We had not gone far into the room when the door closed with a bang and the flame on the candle went out, although I did not feel a stir of wind. Of course we returned to the kitchen, all but Betsy. She suggested that the other girls stay by the stove and that I return to her with a lighted lantern. I was not away from her five minutes, but when I went back Betsy was not standing where I had left her,

and where she had promised to remain. I supposed that she was hiding somewhere, and so I held the lantern high and looked behind all of those massive pieces of carved furniture, but I could not find her. Then I called her name, softly, but there was no reply. By that time I was truly frightened and when I heard you returning, I came at once to ask you to join me in searching for her."

Peyton looked more puzzled than troubled. "Virg," he said, "if this were a tale in a story-book, we might think that Betsy had fallen through a trap-door, but surely there is nothing of that sort in this old ranch house, even though it was built—" he paused and snapped his fingers. "Hum!" he exclaimed, "the plot thickens. Come to think of it, this house was built by an old Spanish Don who was a political outlaw from Mexico. For months he hid in the mountains with his wife, children and servants. Then, when he believed that he had evaded his pursuers, his peons built this adobe house and so it is very possible that he might have built some sort of trap-door through which they could all quickly disappear and evade capture. Come," he added, as he swung open the door into the dark, silent front room, "we'll make a thorough search but I still feel convinced that your Detective Betsy is hiding to tease."

CHAPTER XVII.

WHERE BETSY WAS HIDING.

BUT the searchers were soon convinced that Betsy was not hiding to tease. Peyton lighted all of the heavy brass hanging lamps but they did little to illumine the long, dark room. Indeed, their dim light made the corners darker and more ghostly than they had been before. Each girl was carrying a lantern and the room was searched more thoroughly than it had been by Virginia alone.

"Perhaps Betsy climbed out of a window and is hiding out doors," Babs suggested.

"That would be an impossible feat," Peyton replied, "for, in common with all Spanish houses, these windows are barred."

As he spoke the lad turned and walked toward the fireplace. He looked into its cavernous opening and carefully examined the walls and chimney. Turning back into the room, Peyton met Virginia and they exchanged discouraged glances. "I sim-

ply cannot understand it," the boy said in a low tone.

Before Virginia could reply, a startled cry rang out. They both whirled, expecting to see Betsy, but instead it was Babs who was gazing at one of the barred windows as though she had seen the ghost about which she had been talking.

Peyton leaped to her side. "Barbara," he said, "why are you staring at the window in that wild way? I can see nothing."

"No, you can't now," the girl replied. "It is gone—the face—"

"I believe that mischievous Betsy Clossen is outside peering in at us and laughing to think how she is fooling us all," Virginia said in almost a natural tone. "I know her of old. She loves to tease."

But Babs shook her head as she continued to gaze at the barred window.

"It wasn't Betsy," she whispered. "It was a dark face. I think Trujillo."

"Girls, you come back to the kitchen," Peyton said, "and bar the door after me. I am going to see if Betsy Clossen is really hiding outside. If she is the kind of a girl who would cause you all this

concern just to play a prank, I think you would better send her back East when she is found."

"I, too, thought at first that she was hiding to tease," Margaret said, "but Betsy really has good common-sense and she would not continue to frighten us in this way. Now, I am sure that something has happened to her."

Peyton was much more troubled than he wished the girls to know. It was his house and they were his guests, and his sister's. Too, he had been quietly watching his new Mexican overseer for the past few weeks, as some of his actions seemed very strange.

Then Peyton left the kitchen.

"Oh, how I do wish this mystery was solved," Margaret declared as she sank down in a rocker, her eyes watching the closed door leading into the front room, but almost instantly she was on her feet again clutching Virginia's arm.

"Look! Quick!" she whispered. "Didn't the door open a crack?"

Virginia laughed. "No, no, child," she replied. "Don't let your imagination run riot. I am sure there is some perfectly natural common-place reason for Betsy's disappearance. You girls know perfectly well that there is no such thing as a ghost.

You hear stories about them but you never met a single person who ever saw one."

Then they were silent, just waiting, they knew not for what.

In the meantime Peyton had gone down to the bunk-house.

The lad knew that the girl could not have left the room by any of the exits known to him. The front door had been heavily barricaded by the Spanish Don on the inside and as Peyton did not use that room, he had not opened the massive wooden doors. The windows were barred and the only door of which he had knowledge was the one leading into the kitchen. Suddenly he recalled that there was another door but he had found it locked, with no key in evidence, and believing it led into a store room of some kind, he had thought little of it.

When Babs had cried out that she had seen a face peering in at one of the barred windows, a dark face that looked like Trujillo's, Peyton had determined to go at once to the bunk-house and find out the whereabouts of his head rider.

There was a very long adobe building in which the ten peons lived together. Not far from it was one small solitary adobe which had been built for

the overseer of the Three Cross Ranch. It was in this that Trujillo slept, although he took his meals with Peyton at the big house. The owner of the ranch felt that this was a courtesy due his head rider, and, moreover Trujillo had served him well by saving his cattle on the day of his first appearance in the wild March blizzard.

As he thought of these things, he rebuked himself for having doubted the loyalty of his Mexican cowboy in whom he had so much faith that he had placed him in charge of the entire ranch, and yet, try as he might to banish it, he could not but agree with Betsy that there was something very mysterious about Trujillo.

The long adobe was lighted and the Mexicans squatting on the floor were intent on a game which they played every evening.

Peyton quietly passed the open door and did not attract their attention. He went at once to the overseer's adobe dwelling. It was dark. The door was standing open and in the faint light of the rising moon, Peyton could see that the single room was unoccupied.

"Trujillo," he said softly, but there was no response.

Peyton, troubled indeed, turned back toward the

ranch house. He did not inquire of the peons the whereabouts of Trujillo, for the overseer never associated with his helpers although he treated them kindly.

What should he do? What could he do? The lad was thinking as he again ascended the steps and entered the kitchen door. It was then that he heard a crash followed by a shrill cry in the front room.

Instantly the girls were on their feet and they were all staring at the closed door when it burst open and Betsy Clossen rushed in. Her face was very pale and she was so excited that at first she could not speak.

"Betsy, is it really you?" Barbara exclaimed joyfully as she caught her friend in her arms.

"I'm not sure certain it is, myself," Betsy replied as she sank down in a rocker. "I've had the most exciting experience."

The others gathered about her. "Do tell us just what happened," Virginia said.

"Well, when you left me standing alone in the dark room, I happened to take a step backward and that caused me to sit down very suddenly in a big mahogany chair. I caught at the arms and I must have pushed a button that was part of the carving. Instantly I realized that I was slowly sinking, al-

though it was so dark I could not tell just what was happening. The floor seemed to have opened under me and very quietly and easily the chair was descending like an elevator. At last I was convinced that I had been let down through a trap-door. I could hear it closing above me. I found myself in a dark room. I didn't dare leave the chair, however, so there I sat, shouting lustily for help, but I could not make you hear. I must have been there an hour when I decided that I would experiment with the chair. I thought that if by pushing one knob I had caused it to descend into the cellar-like room, there must be another knob that would lift it again. At last I found such a contrivance, pushed it and slowly the chair ascended. I gave a cry of joy when I was once more in the front room, I sprang from the chair, knocking over a small table which fell with a crash and here I am. Now that it's all over, I am glad that it happened. What an exciting experience it will be to tell Cousin Bob."

"And so you see, girls, the mysterious Trujillo had nothing to do with it," Virginia said.

Peyton, however, remembering the unoccupied bunk-house of the overseer was still troubled, but a moment later his fears concerning the loyalty of his

cowboy were set at rest. The galloping of a horse's feet was heard and then a hallooing. Peyton swung open the door and Trujillo stood there.

Rapidly in Spanish he told the other lad that one of the peons had reported early in the evening that a yearling had fallen into a water-hole and that together they had departed to endeavor to rescue it. Luckily there was but little water in the hole and the young cow, though greatly frightened, was unhurt and they had brought it back to keep for a few days in the hospital corral.

This was all so commonplace that it restored the girls to a more normal state of mind and Peyton rebuked himself for having doubted his head rider who was ever serving him so faithfully.

"Now, let's go to bed, girls, and forget all that has happened. We are quite used to elevators and since we know that the Don, who built this house, needed some way to hide quickly from his pursuers, we can easily understand his descending chair. Tomorrow I intend to take a ride in it."

Virginia's matter of fact tone calmed the younger and more nervous girls and soon they retired.

The recent owners of the Three Cross Ranch had built a wing leading from the kitchen. This

contained two simply furnished bedrooms which the four girls were to occupy.

Betsy Clossen was the last to fall asleep. She kept wondering where she had seen Trujillo before. Nowhere, that she could remember, and yet, if not, why did she seem to be haunted with the idea that she had seen him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ELEVATOR CHAIR.

THE next day the girls were awakened by the sun shining in at their open windows; young calves in the near corral were calling to their mothers and the hens in the chicken yard at the back of the house were cheerily clucking as they busily scratched for their breakfast.

This was all so commonplace that the girls arose, laughing as they spoke of their fears of the night before. As soon as their morning meal had been finished, Betsy Clossen wished to visit the scene of her recent adventure, and so all together they entered the dark, silent front room.

There were heavy wooden blinds on all of the windows except the one through which Babs on the night before had seen a dusky face peering.

"Girls," the little mistress of the Three Cross Ranch exclaimed, "since this is to be my home, I am going to frighten away the ghost by letting in the sunshine. Virg, will you help me unbar these wooden blinds?"

Willing hands assisted and soon the sunshine was flooding in, revealing the wonderful old mahogany furniture. There was dust deep in each of the carvings, while long deserted cobwebs stretched across corners and they, too, were dust laden.

"It is all very fine, I've no doubt," Babs began, as, with arms akimbo she looked about at her new possessions, "but I certainly do wish that the Spanish Don to whom all this grandeur belongs would return and claim it. I'm like Mrs. Dartley, I would just love to have this long, big room furnished in the cozy, comfortable way to which I am accustomed."

"Well, I certainly would take those paintings down from the wall," Margaret declared with a shudder. "I would rather have any number of ghosts than those foreign folks watching every move I made. Honest Injun, they give me the chilly shivers staring at one the way they do."

Virginia laughed. "Where's Betsy Clossen?" she suddenly inquired.

While the other girls had been busy removing the wooden blinds, that maiden had been experimenting with her "elevator" chair. As Virg spoke, the girls heard a gay shout and turned in time to see Betsy's head disappearing below the floor.

They ran in that direction and reached the spot just as the trap-door closed and snapped into place.

Babs shook her finger at the spot as she declared: "Mysterious chair, this is the very last day that you will operate. I'm going to make this wonderful long room livable and I surely don't want chairs that will carry some unsuspecting guest down to the cellar."

Margaret laughed merrily.

"Wouldn't it be amusing, though, if one did have a solemn, serious caller, a deacon or someone like that, who happened to sit on this chair and suddenly disappear? You had better keep it, Babs, it may come in handy."

But the little housekeeper vigorously shook her head. "No, my mind is made up once for all. Every bit of this foreign furniture is going to be stored in an outhouse until the rightful owner claims it, and I am going to Douglas when you girls return to V. M. Ranch and buy just the things that I would enjoy having."

"I wonder why Betsy doesn't come back," Margaret remarked. She had been intently watching the trap door to see what would happen next.

The three girls kelt and called in chorus: "Betsy! Are you down there? Why don't you bring the

elevator chair up again?" There was no reply. Not a sound from below could they hear. The girls tried to open the trap-door, but the contrivance that secured it was underneath the floor.

"What if the machinery doesn't work?" Margaret said, looking up in sudden dismay, "Betsy might smother down there."

"Who is talking about me?" a merry voice called. The astonished girls sprang to their feet and whirled around. There was the laughing Betsy standing back of them.

The other three crowded about. "Did you make any new discoveries? Tell us what happened!"

"Well, when I reached the cellar," Betsy began, "I hunted about to find the other knob, the one that would lift me again to this room, but lo and behold, it appeared to have lost its magic. I pulled on it and pushed, but the chair did not move. I could hear you calling to me, although your voices sounded faint and far. I replied but I was sure that you could not hear. Then I sat for a few moments thinking what I ought to do next. Of course I knew that you would soon call for help if I did not return and that Peyton would break open the trap. When my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I thought I saw a door at the far

side of the room. Groping my way toward it, I found that it opened easily. Just beyond was a spiral stairway which I ascended. At the top was another door, but it was locked. I was about to pound upon it, when I happened to touch a key which I turned and here I am."

"Oh!" Virginia exclaimed. "I remember that door. It is the one I tried to open last night when the candle blew out, but I found it locked. Peyton said he supposed that it led into a store room but he had never been curious enough about the matter to investigate."

Babs was opening the windows, letting in the cool morning breeze. "I'm going to ask Peyton if we can't have these bars removed," she declared as she stood peering through them. "I feel as though I were in a jail looking out between bars this way." Suddenly she uttered an exclamation which took all of the girls hurrying to her side.

"What is it, Babs? What do you see? Why are you staring so intently at the ground?" were the questions hurled at her. Babs whirled about and faced them, her eyes wide with excitement. "This is the window through which I saw a Mexican last night peering in at us," she said.

The others nodded. "You all laughed at me and

declared that I was letting my imagination run riot." Then she added, exultingly, "Follow me, young ladies, and you will discover that I, too, am a very fine detective."

Much mystified, the girls trooped out of the kitchen door and around the house. Babs, in the lead, stopped and picked up something from the ground not far from the barred window. Turning she held aloft a peculiarly shaped key.

"This probably will solve the mystery for us," she declared. "Good, there is Peyton. Hail him, Betsy, will you?"

The lad mounted, was about to start with several peons for the valley pasture when he heard the girls calling. Whirling his horse and bidding the Mexicans wait his return, he galloped up. Dismounting, he asked Babs what was wanted of him. He listened to her story, almost believing that she had been imaginative until she produced the strangely shaped key as evidence that some one had been there.

"Brother, did you ever see that key before?" Babs eagerly inquired.

The lad nodded. "Yes," he replied. "I saw it lying on Trujillo's bed yesterday morning when I went to his bunk early to ask his advice before be-

ginning the work of the day. I picked up the key at the time and examined it because of its queer shape, but I made no comment as the matter I had called to discuss was much more important. However, I cannot believe that my trusted overseer would spy upon the actions of my sister and her guests. There must be some other solution of this mystery," he said. Then he added: "Please say nothing concerning it and I will try to find out the truth about the whole matter."

Peyton slipped the key into one of his coat pockets and lifting his hat to the girls he rode away.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GIRL DETECTIVE.

BETSY CLOSSEN in her role of young detective watched for an opportunity to slip away from the others as she wished to think out some plan by which she might be able to discover the real identity of the mysterious Mexican, Trujillo.

When Peyton had said that he had seen the oddly shaped key only the morning before in the bunk-house of his overseer, Betsy was more than ever convinced that Trujillo's presence on the Three Cross ranch was not merely because he needed employment. And yet what could he want? Peyton had no money on the place. Betsy had heard him tell his sister only the night before that he would have to ride to Douglas the following day to visit the bank and procure the money he would need to pay the peons for a month's work.

There were no treasures in the old Spanish house that Trujillo could wish to possess. The mahogany furniture was valuable, no doubt, but much too

heavy for anyone to spirit away, and the only other possible treasures in the room which Babs called haunted were the paintings of the family of Don Carlos Spinoza. Surely no one would wish to steal those. In fact if any one did, Babs would gladly assist them, so eager was she to remove from the walls of her new home the life-sized portraits of those "foreigners."

"I don't believe I'm a very good detective after all," Betsy sighed. "I don't seem to hit upon the right clue to start from," she thought as she followed a trail leading, she did not notice where, so intently was she thinking and gazing at the ground.

"I have three main facts to work with," she told herself. "The first is that Trujillo is mysterious, even Peyton thinks that. The second is the dark face that peered through the barred window last night when the girls were searching for me and the third is that the person who peered dropped an oddly shaped key which Peyton had seen in the room of his overseer.

"The conclusion to be drawn is that Trujillo is remaining at the Three Cross ranch, not because of the remuneration he receives, but in order to obtain some information, since there is nothing valuable to carry away."

"Three Cross," she repeated to herself. "That surely is a queer name for a cattle ranch. Oh, I remember now! Peyton said that old Don Carlos was very religious, and that somewhere on the place he had erected a shrine on which were three crosses and that he went there to implore protection from his pursuing political enemies. I must ask Babs where—" Betsy suddenly paused and looked about her. She saw that the trail she had been following seemed to end abruptly in a lonely sheltered hollow among sand hills. In front of the girl stood an old shrine above which were three wooden crosses. One had fallen to the ground, another leaned far over, but the center one was erect and seemed to be more firmly established in the sand than the other two had been.

Betsy stood looking around, awed by the loneliness of the place, when suddenly, through the stillness there arose a long-drawn-out wail. With a startled cry the girl turned and fled. She ran back over the trail as she had never run before.

When she felt that she was a safe distance away she turned and looked back, almost believing that she would see some ghostly figure pursuing her. Standing on the top of a sand hill, its lean length silhouetted against the bright sky, she saw a lone

coyote. She shuddered and looked back again, but at last she was convinced that the wolf of the desert had no intention of following her but had departed for some other haunt.

Slowing her pace, Betsy soliloquized: "Well, I discovered something, even though it may have nothing to do with unraveling the mystery. Now let me see, where did I leave off? Oh, yes; I had decided that Trujillo is staying on this ranch for some reason other than that of employment, and yet it cannot be to steal, for there is nothing on the place that one would want, and—" Suddenly Betsy stood still and stared into space, thinking intently. Then she laughed. "I'm a great detective, I must say. I haven't given a moment's thought to the most important clue of all—the key! Trujillo must think there is something around here to unlock, otherwise why did he have the key?" The overseer had arrived in a March blizzard, she had heard Peyton tell, without box or baggage of any kind, nor had he obtained any since his arrival.

"Hum," thought the would-be detective. "I see it all now. There is a treasure hidden at the house, probably in the front room which has always been kept closed, and Trujillo had planned that night to slip in, unobserved, but having seen a light in the

room, he had first peered through the window and had then beat a hasty retreat. Hurray for me!" Betsy concluded exultingly. "The mystery is solved. I do believe."

She was nearing the house and she saw the girls on the porch beckoning to her.

"Where have you been? Lunch is ready," Margaret called.

"Oh, just for a walk," was Betsy's non-committal reply. She had decided to say nothing of her discovery until she had had time to look around a little more all by herself. But the would-be detective was to hear something that noon which convinced her that she was following the wrong clue.

CHAPTER XX.

A QUEER KEY.

THE girls were seated about the table at one end of the big comfortable kitchen and, it being Margaret's turn to play waitress, she was passing a dish of frijolies when they heard a horse galloping under the windows. "Peyton has returned just in time," Megsy announced, but, when the door opened, it was Trujillo who appeared. He seemed to be much excited, but what he said caused a great deal more excitement among his listeners, for in perfectly good English he inquired:

"Senoritas, have you seen an oddly shaped key? It is an antique and of great value to me, though to no one else. I left it in my bunk-house yesterday morning. I recall having seen your brother," turning to address the astonished Barbara, "when he picked it up and examined it. Since then I have given the key no thought, but a moment ago, chancing to look for it, I could not find it. Believing that

Senor Peyton, without thought had slipped it into his pocket, I came here in search of him."

Barbara cast a helpless glance at the ever calm Virginia, who replied: "Trujillo, the key about which you speak, is, I am sure, the one that we found close to the house early this morning. We gave it to Peyton. He is spending the day at the valley pasture directing the mending of the fence around the grass lands."

"I thank you, Senorita," the tall dark lad said, sweeping his sombrero in a courtly manner.

When he was gone in search of his employer, the girls sank back in the chairs from which they had risen, and, one and all uttered some characteristic exclamation.

"Silver fishes in a shining sea," Betsy Clossen said, and although the remark could mean nothing, it was evident that the speaker meant a great deal. "I surely am a wonderful detective," she declared. "Every clue I thought I had has vanished." Then turning to Babs, she added: "Didn't you tell us that Trujillo could not speak English?"

That maiden looked puzzled. "I don't seem to recall why I thought he couldn't," she confessed. "Probably because he never did in all the time he has been here."

Virginia smiled: "We haven't been here two days as yet," she reminded them, and we have made no effort to converse with Trujillo. We just took it for granted he wouldn't understand us. Well, one thing is certain and that is that Trujillo did not peer in the window nor drop the key and I am glad that he didn't. Everything Peyton has told us about him has been so fine and noble, I would be sorry to discover that he was a spy."

"Hark! What was that?" Virginia had risen and was listening, intently. There was the sound of something heavy falling in the front room, then a hurrying of feet and the slamming of a door.

Virginia fearlessly entered the room which was flooded with sunlight, since the blinds had been removed. She went at once to the door opening upon the spiral stairway. It was unlocked early that morning. The other girls had cautiously followed and were searching for the something which had fallen. "There it is," Margaret whispered, pointing.

The something that had fallen with a crash proved to be a rock which had been pried out of the wall of the fireplace.

"Oh, girls," Betsy said, her eyes glowing. "We're on the trail of whoever it was peered in last night. There is something in this room that he wants. Of

course we have decided definitely that it wasn't Trujillo, and—"

"I'm not so sure of that." It was the quiet Margaret who spoke and the others turned toward her.

"Not sure? Why of course we're sure. If he had dropped the key, he wouldn't have to ask where it had been lost, would he?" Babs inquired.

"Oh, I know what Margaret means," Betsy interrupted. "She thinks that in order to throw suspicion away from himself, he would pretend ignorance of the whereabouts of the key. Then, when we directed him to the valley pasture, what could be simpler than for him to pretend to go there, but in reality to wheel back when he was out of our sight and return to procure whatever it is that he seems to want."

The girls had returned to the kitchen and were huddled as far from the front room as they could get and were whispering together excitedly.

"Well," Betsy confessed. "I've always wanted a mystery to unravel, but I seem doomed to failure now that I really have one. It grows more mysterious every minute."

Margaret had to laugh at her friend's dismal expression. "Betsy," she said to tease, "I'll dare you to ride down to the cellar room in your elevator chair and see who is hiding there. Someone must be, for

he just went down the spiral stairs and locked the door behind him."

The would-be detective shook her head. "I told you this morning that the machinery is broken. That chair is doomed to remain in the cellar."

To verify her statement, Betsy drew the reluctant Margaret toward the door, opened it cautiously and peered into the front room. Then she closed it with a bang, and turned a pale face toward the girls. "The chair—it's in its right place. Someone has ridden up in it and must be hiding in the front room. How I wish Peyton would come. I for one have had enough mystery to last for a lifetime."

"Here comes brother, and someone is riding at his side. I declare, it's Trujillo, and so the intruder must be someone else. I do wish they would hurry. I'm expecting any minute that something is going to happen," Babs declared.

Margaret, who had opened the door leading to the back porch, uttered an exclamation of astonishment, then, turning she beckoned as she said: "Come, quick! Something is hapening right this minute."

What the girls, crowding into the open doorway, saw was the figure of a peon crouching and creeping along behind a hedge of mesquite bushes. He kept watching the trail down which he saw Peyton and

Trujillo descending, and, when they were close to him, he lay flat on the sand burrowing as deep as he could in his endeavor to escape detection.

The riders, deeply engrossed in their conversation, were not looking in that direction, and when Margaret saw that they were riding past the mesquite clump without seeing the hiding peon, she ran out on the porch and halloed to them, making frantic motions. These might not have been understood by the two riders, but the ignorant and greatly frightened Mexican, believing that his hiding place was being revealed, took to his feet and raced for the sand hills. Peyton and Trujillo, seeing him, wheeled their horses and galloped in pursuit, and he was quickly overtaken.

"It is Pinez, whom we recently engaged." Trujillo said in English, which the peon could not understand. "I have been watching him for several days. Last week I sent him to town for my mail and I was convinced that one of my letters was being withheld from me." Then turning to the sullen peon, he asked: "Pinez, why were you hiding? Have you a letter that belongs to me?"

"Si, Senor," was the reply, and from his pocket the Mexican drew an envelope, much soiled from frequent handling.

Trujillo's face brightened. "It is for this that I have been waiting," was his remark, which greatly mystified Peyton, but he made no comment.

Then the overseer addressed the peon in Spanish, saying: "Pinez, you are dismissed. Return to Sonora but say nothing of the content of this letter."

The peon's manner was deferential in the extreme. Turning, he walked toward the long bunk-house from which, half an hour later, the girls saw him ride away toward the South on the small, mottled horse on which he had so recently arrived.

All through lunch the two boys talked about the affairs of the ranch as though nothing mysterious or unusual had happened. After the noon meal was finished the overseer turned toward the little mistress of Three Cross saying with frank pleasantness: "Senorita, I have heard you speak of a front room that you call haunted. With your kind permission, I would like to visit that room in your company."

Babs was too well bred to show the astonishment she certainly felt. "Come, let us all go in there," she replied, rising.

Trujillo stepped aside with Peyton to permit Barbara and her girl friends to enter. Betsy regretted that she had to go ahead as she wished to watch the overseer's every move, for she felt that now, if ever,

she would prove that she was really a good detective. She believed that the moment for solving the mystery had come.

Trujillo walked about, gazing especially at the life-sized portraits upon the walls. Indeed he was so absorbed in one and another that he seemed to quite forget their presence.

He stood for a long time before the painting of a beautiful young Spanish mother with a dark-eyed little girl on her lap and a tall, handsome youth standing at her side.

Trujillo, directly beneath this painting, turned and smiled at the almost breathless girls. He was about to speak, but before he could utter a word, there was a glad cry from Betsy Clossen.

"I know now who you are," she exclaimed glowingly. "You are the little boy in that painting, grown up!"

Trujillo bowed in his courtly way. "Si Senorita. I am Trujillo Carlos Spinoza. Now I will tell you why I am here."

CHAPTER XXI.

TRUJILLO IDENTIFIED.

WHEN Trujillo announced that he was indeed the lad portrayed in the painting, now grown, Betsy Clossen was over-joyed that she had unraveled the mystery as she had so desired. Notwithstanding the fact that the Spanish youth closely resembled the portrait of the boy in the picture hanging directly above his head, not one of the other young people had observed this.

"Oh, I am so glad!" Babs joyfully exclaimed. "Now you will take all this furniture away, won't you? Because it really belongs to your family, you know. Mrs. Dartley said that Don Carlos Spinoza asked permission to leave this room furnished, promising to remove everything in it at his first opportunity. That being so long ago we feared no one was ever coming to claim it."

Before the Spanish lad could reply, Peyton asked: "Trujillo, why did you not tell me at once who you were?"

"Merely because I did not know that I had reached the ranch which had formerly belonged to my grandfather. I believed it to be miles north of here. But, let me begin at the beginning of my story. When we left this place years ago with my grandfather, Don Carlos Spinoza, we all went to Spain, where we remained until recently. The sudden death of my grandfather followed by a financial crash left my mother, sister and me almost penniless. It was then that mother told me that I, as the only living grandson, was really the owner of a large estate in Mexico, which had been a gift to my ancestors from the king of Spain and that this land grant could not be confiscated nor sold except with the signed consent of the heir thereto.

"When I inquired why they had left this rich heritage, for the estate is in Sonora and the mines are of great value, mother told me, for the first time, that we had been political exiles from Mexico. However, she believed that the government had been completely changed and that we might now return with safety and take possession of the land of our fathers. Soon after this we set sail for America, and my mother and sister are now in Mexico awaiting my return."

"But Trujillo, even yet I do not understand the

reason for your sojourn here as my overseer," Peyton said.

The Spanish youth smiled. "No, but you will as I continue my story. When we reached Mexico City we were welcomed by old friends of the family, who informed us that soon after our flight our estate had been confiscated and occupied by the political enemies of my grandfather. On looking into the matter I found that this family had papers proving, (or so it would seem), that the land grant had really belonged to their ancestors and had been usurped by my great grandfather.

"It was evident that we could not disprove their claim, as we had no papers whatever to show. Then it was that my mother recalled her father's futile effort on the day that he died to tell her of the location of some very important papers. So overcome had she been with grief that she had been unable to heed even the little he could say, and so, when later she tried to recall what my grandfather had endeavored to tell her, she could not.

"It was then that I determined to ride across the desert, finding, if I could, the ranch to which my grandfather had fled when he became a political exile. I doubt if I would ever have found my way here had it not been that I was driven far from the

trail I was following by the wild blizzard which you will recall. I at once accepted your offer, partly because I needed money to send to my mother, and also because I thought I might learn something which would enable me to locate the ranch formerly belonging to my grandfather. When you told me that you had recently come from the East and had obtained the ranch from the Dartleys, in whose family it had been for many years, I did not question you more, not dreaming that this was the place for which I was searching.

"The letter which Pinez was concealing was from my mother telling me that she had suddenly recalled what her father had said in his last hour. 'The land grant—Three Cross.'

"Of course I had often heard you speak of this place as The Three Cross Ranch and now, when I enter this room for the first time and find myself surrounded with portraits of my family, I realize that this is where the lost papers are to be found."

"Trujillo, why was Pinez searching for those papers?" It was Margaret who spoke. The Spanish youth turned toward her as he replied: "I believe his plan was to find them and then hold them until I offered him a large reward." Then smiling directly at Betsy, he added: "Senorita, since you so cleverly

discovered my identity, will you not also discover for me the hiding place of my land grant?"

The little would-be detective felt greatly honored to be chosen as aide to the handsome Spanish youth, and she determined to make every effort to find the hidden papers.

CHAPTER XXII.

SEARCHING FOR THE LAND GRANT.

BETSY CLOSSEN had hardly slept a wink the night following her discovery of the real identity of the mysterious Trujillo. She kept thinking and thinking of a possible hiding place for the lost papers which, when found, would restore to the family of Don Carlos Spinoza their rightful estate.

"How I do hope I may be the one to find them," was her last conscious thought at night and her first on waking the next morning.

It was not yet daybreak, but Betsy quietly arose, dressed and tiptoed out of the room without having disturbed Margaret from her peaceful slumber.

Reaching the kitchen, Betsy stood for a moment trying to think where she would begin her search. Then, suddenly, she remembered something. The peon had been trying to pry the stones from the walls of the great old fireplace. There might be a secret opening with a stone fitted in to conceal it.

Lighting a lantern, for it was still dark, Betsy stole into the long silent front room, not without many a tremor of fear, for, even now, when the mystery was nearly solved, the place seemed haunted with the many foreign faces gazing down at her from the walls.

Trying not to look at them as they were revealed one by one in the dim light of her lantern, Betsy went at once to the fireplace. She did not attempt to pry out the stones, but tried to find one that looked as though it had not been securely fastened and could easily be removed.

However, each stone within her reach was cemented to its neighbor, and, convinced at last that her search at the fireplace was to be unrewarded, she turned away. Walking to the center of the room, she stood looking about, trying to recall all of the detective stories she had ever read.

There was always a secret panel in the wall which revealed a hidden treasure if one could but find the spring, but these walls were adobe and there were no panels. True, there was the small dark cellar into which the elevator chair descended, and from which spiral ascended, and yet, did she quite dare to go down in that dungeon-like place alone while the rest of the household slept? Betsy suddenly

lifted her head and listened intently. She had heard soft foot-steps approaching in the kitchen, then the door opened cautiously. It was Margaret who appeared, pale and wide eyed.

"What in the world are you doing here, Betsy?" she inquired, as she advanced into the room. "I woke up and found you were gone. I thought you might be walking in your sleep. You were so restless all night and kept saying things."

"What did I say?" Betsy inquired curiously.

"Nothing that made any sense as far as I could tell," was the reply. "You kept mumbling every now and then, but once you sat right up in bed and said in the queerest voice: 'Three crosses. That's where the papers are.' I shook you and whispered, 'Betsy, what are you saying?' but you lay down again and did not reply. Then I realized that you had been asleep all of the time."

The eyes of the young would-be detective were glowing with sudden inspiration. Seizing the wondering Margaret by the arm, she exclaimed: "Come with me, Megsy!" and before the other girl could realize what was happening, she was being dragged across the kitchen and out of the house where the desert lay silent and uncanny in the

deepest darkness of the night, which comes just before the dawn.

Margaret, being of a more timid nature, was truly frightened when she saw that Betsy was dragging her farther and farther away from the ranch house and toward the lonely sand hills. The truth of the matter was that at any other time, Betsy would have been frightened also, but at present she was possessed of just one idea which was that the papers for which they were searching were hidden, in all probability, at the Shrine of The Three Crosses. When Margaret told her what she had said in her sleep, Betsy believed that the message had come to her as an inspiration, and so sure was she of this, that for the moment she had become unconscious of fear; too, she had forgotten the lean, gaunt wolf of the desert, whose long drawn-out wail had so startled her on the occasion of her last visit.

"Betsy, let go of my arm," Margaret managed to gasp, "and tell me where we are going." Then a terrible thought came to Megsy. What if Betsy should be walking in her sleep after all, and what if she were taking them both to some place where harm would befall them. So convinced was Margaret that this was the real explanation of her

friend's actions that she whirled about as soon as Betsy loosened the clasp on her arm and raced back toward the ranch house. A light appeared in the small adobe, then, as she was about to pass, the door opened and Trujillo stepped out. In the grey light of the early dawn, Margaret's flying form was easily seen and the overseer, much mystified by the appearance of one of the girls in such seemingly terrorized flight, quickly overtook her.

"Senorita," he exclaimed when she turned a white face toward him. "What is the matter? Where have you been? What have you seen?"

"Oh, I am so glad you came," Megsy replied. "I was going after Peyton. Betsy Clossen is walking in her sleep. I just know that she is, and she'll come to some harm if we don't bring her back. She says the queerest things about lost papers being hidden at the Shrine of The Three Crosses. I never heard of such a place. Did you, Senor?"

Trujillo replied in the negative. He had never heard the peons mention a shrine and surely they would know if there were one.

"Wait here, Senorita, I will get horses and we will follow your friend."

When Margaret had deserted Betsy, for a moment the young would-be detective felt a strong de-

sire to turn and race after her, but she would not permit herself to do this. She was so eager to find the lost papers and she was more than ever convinced, as she thought about the matter, that they were probably near the shrine. This had been the daily haunt of the old Don who had prayed that his estate might be restored to him. What would be more natural than that he would conceal the papers there, believing, as he probably did, that his political enemies when they found him would confiscate the documents, making it impossible for him to prove that the land grant had really belonged to his ancestors.

As Betsy neared the lonely sand hills, she dreaded more and more the moment when she would enter the sheltered dug-out where she had found the shrine. She knew that, loud as she might call, no one would hear.

"Oh, I can't go on! I can't! I can't" she exclaimed, her fearlessness suddenly deserting her. Then it was that she heard something weird indeed.

In a voice that sounded almost like a mournful echo, some one was calling. Then in her heart there was a sudden joyful realization of the truth. Some one was shouting her name and the sand hills

were sending back the echo: "Betsy, where are you?"

"Here! Here!" she replied as she ran out to meet the approaching riders. Of course she might have known that Margaret would soon return with one of the boys.

She was glad to recognize that the other rider was Trujillo. As they drew near, the Spanish youth saw that the girl standing alone near the sand hills did not look as courageous as her fearless actions had implied. Instead her face was pale, her eyes wide, although her expression was one of gladness, because she was no longer alone.

Betsy was not asleep, of that Trujillo was convinced. Leaping to the ground, he exclaimed: "Senorita, what mad fancy brought you to this lonely place before the dawning of the day?"

"Oh, senor, the papers! I am sure, as sure as one can be when one does not really know, that they are hidden somewhere near the Shrine of the Three Crosses."

"Three Crosses?" Margaret repeated. "That is what you said in your sleep."

"Where is the shrine, senorita?" Trujillo inquired. Betsy led the way between the sand hills to the small dug-out in which were three large wooden

crosses. One had fallen to the sand, another leaned over, but the third stood erect. Trujillo bared his head and knelt upon the sand for a moment in prayer. The girls could understand that the lad must indeed feel awed to find himself before the shrine which had been so often visited by his grandfather, Don Carlos Spinoza. He soon arose and when he turned toward them they knew that he had been deeply affected. Then in a tone of conviction he said:

“Senorita, your dream, I am sure, is to be fulfilled. My grandfather’s last words were: ‘The land grant at the Three Crosses.’ If he had meant at the Three Cross ranch, he would not have used the plural.”

Then Trujillo stood gazing about him, thinking intently. He was trying to decide the probable hiding place of the document he sought. Suddenly his thought was interrupted by an exclamation from Betsy, the girl was gazing as though fascinated at the large wooden cross standing erect between the two that had fallen.

“Senor,” she said, “there must be some reason why that cross in the center has stood while the others have not. It must have a firmer foundation. Do you not think so?”

"I do indeed," was the reply of the youth, who at once knelt and began digging at the base of the cross. The sand on top was soft, but, as he advanced, he found that it became more difficult to remove. The action of the rain and sun during the ten years since the cross had been erected had hardened it until it was the nature of sand stone.

He arose. "Senorita Betsy," he said, "our surmise was not correct after all. There seems to be nothing holding this cross but the hardened sand."

Betsy was keenly disappointed, although she was not entirely convinced. Trujillo left the girls standing alone while he advanced farther into the cave-like dug-out. It extended deeper into the sand hills than he had at first supposed. He did not advance far, however, but stopped suddenly and gazed intently into the interior, and then, assuming an attitude of seeming indifference, he returned. He did not wish to startle the girls by telling them that he had seen two green eyes gleaming in the darkness at the back of the cave. He believed the creature to be either a mountain lion or a coyote, which of late had been killing the young calves.

"Senoritas," he said in a voice which did not betray his real concern, "our friends at the ranch

house will be troubled because we do not return. The breakfast hour is long passed. I suggest that we come here later in the day, bringing with us a pick and shovel that we may make a thorough investigation."

As he spoke, he led the girls away from the crosses to the place where the ponies were.

"Promise me you won't search for the papers unless I am with you," Betsy implored. The Spanish youth smiled at the pretty, flushed face of the pleading girl, as he replied: "I promise, Senorita."

All that morning Betsy watched and waited. She almost lost faith in the promise of Trujillo when, at last, she beheld him returning from the sand hills, accompanied by Peyton, but when she saw that they were armed with guns and did not carry a shovel or pick, she knew that they had been on some other mission.

Trujillo rode to the ranch house and entering the living room, he said to the eager girl: "If you are ready, Senorita Betsy, we will go at once."

Margaret and Virginia were busily employed in the kitchen, but they glanced up when they heard the cantering of horses' hoofs beneath the window.

"I wonder where Betsy and Trujillo are going,"

Virg said. Margaret, who had been sworn to secrecy, did not reply.

"Oh, I presume they are still searching for the land grant papers," Megsy said. "I'd heaps rather be in this sunny, comfortable kitchen making pies, wouldn't you, Virg?"

The older girl smiled. "Perhaps it is well that we have different interests," she replied. "Some of us like to do adventurous things and some of us like to do the quiet, homely things, but I really enjoy both the desert life and then home life." Then she added, with one of her radiant smiles: "I do believe, Megsy, that I am a natural born enjoyer."

"You are indeed," her friend responded, admiringly. "You always seem so happy and contented, Virg, wherever you are. Tell me your secret."

Virginia put her arm about Margaret and drew her down to the sunny window-seat, as she replied: "Mother often told me that we ought to let our lives blossom as a flower unfolds, just peacefully and trustingly, enjoying the song of a bird, and the warmth of the sun and whatever beauty is near us. Many people try to force their life blossoms open and are so continually reaching for something beyond, that they never really enjoy the loveliness that is near them and so they become worried and

weary. Every morning I ask myself: "What happiness can I find and give *today* in the place where I am? That keeps me contented and happy." Then springing up, she laughingly added: "Yum! Doesn't the pie smell good? I do hope everyone will be here in time for lunch." But it was long after the lunch hour before Betsy and Trujillo returned.

In the meantime Betsy and Trujillo had reached the sand hills and were standing in front of the three crosses. Trujillo glanced into the cave beyond the shrine. Little did his companion know that in the darkness there was a newly made grave.

At Betsy's suggestion he began at once to dig beneath the middle cross. The pick was needed to break the sand stone, but suddenly it struck something that did not break. One corner of an iron box was revealed, which however, was so firmly imbedded in the rock that it took a long time to entirely free it. Betsy, after the first exultant exclamation, had stood silently watching.

How she did hope that this box contained the land grant document that the mother and sister of Trujillo might have their home restored to them.

When at last the box was freed, they both knelt beside it to see if the key hole was as queerly shaped

as was the key that the mother of Trujillo had given him. When they found that it fitted exactly, Betsy's joy could no longer be restrained, and leaping up, she clapped her hands and uttered varied exclamations of delight.

Trujillo glanced at her with a happy smile. "Senorita," he said, "before I open this box, I want you to promise me something. If the papers are here, and if our home is restored, will you and your friends come some day, and visit us? My mother and my sister Carmelita will welcome you gladly."

Then the key turned and the box was opened. There was a glad cry from the girl who had been watching breathlessly, for there lay a packet of yellowing papers. Placing them in his pocket, the Spanish lad rose and held out his hand to his flushed and excited companion. "Senorita Betsy," he said, his melodious voice tense with feeling, "I thank you for your interest and my mother and sister will want to thank you when, with your friends, you can visit us."

Then leaving the heavy iron box in the sand by the crosses, these two rode back to the ranch house to tell the others that, at last, the long lost papers had been found.

"I shall leave for Mexico tomorrow if Monsieur



There lay a packet of yellowing papers.
(Page 224) ("Virginia's Ranch Neighbors.")

Peyton can spare me, but before I go I shall return alone to the shrine and leave the three crosses standing, firm and erect, in the memory of my grandfather."

And this Trujillo did, going to the shrine at sunrise on the following morning. Then directly after breakfast, the Spanish youth rode away to the south.

"Girls," Betsy cried, "how I do wish, before I have to return East, that we might visit the beautiful Carmelita Spinoza.

"Stranger things than that have happened," Virginia replied.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALARM ABOUT MALCOLM.

A FEW days after the departure of Trujillo, Virginia remarked one morning at breakfast, "Barbara, I feel much as you did when you were with us at V. M., a great anxiety, which I cannot understand, to return home and see if all is well with Malcolm. The truth is I have been away from him and from dear old Uncle Tex for so many, many months, that I feel sure they were sorry to have me desert them, and, so, if Margaret and Betsy are willing, I think we would better return to V. M. today."

The pretty face of Babs plainly showed her disappointment, and Virginia hastened to add, "Won't you come with us, Barbara, or, if not that, perhaps, Betsy would like to make you a longer visit here at Three Cross."

A sudden hopeful brightening in the blue eyes of Barbara brought from her dear friend Betsy an immediate acceptance of the plan, and, so, an hour

later, that they might start before the sun was high, the two who were departing bade goodbye to the three who were to remain and rode away, looking back often to wave and smile.

When at last they had crossed the ridge which hid the Three Cross Ranch from their view and were riding along the level desert, Margaret looked anxiously, inquiringly at her friend.

"Dear, you seem very thoughtful. Are you troubled about anything in particular?"

The questioner was more than ever puzzled when she saw the morning glow in the truly beautiful face that was turned toward her.

"No, sister of mine, I was thinking of something very wonderful, but just for a time it must be my secret."

Virginia was recalling an hour that she and Peyton had spent alone the evening before, sitting on a huge boulder that was near the ranch house. It had been a gloriously moonlighted night, and, for a long time, they had remained silent, just content, it would seem, to be together in that truest and rarest of all forms of comradeship. Then quietly Virg had led Peyton to talk of his ranch, his interest, and of what he had done while she had been away.

Somehow, in the magic of the loveliness all about

them, it had seemed but natural that the lad should tell her of his love.

"May I hope, Virginia, that some day, you will be here with me,—with us?" And Virginia's reply had been seriously given. "Ask me that again when I am eighteen, will you Peyton?"

And with that answer the lad had to be content, but in it he found much to cause him to rejoice; much that gave him hope.

It was a strange coincident, that, at that moment, as Virginia was thinking over the conversation of the night before, Megsy should ask. "Virg, who do you suppose will be the first girl of our acquaintance to marry?"

Her companion smiled, "Why dear, I don't know," she replied. "Babs and Betsy are far too young, someway, to even think of such things. Betsy declares that she is to be wedded to her career and Barbara, though she likes Benjy Wilson has not as yet even thought of romance."

"Well, I am sure it will not be me." Virg thought she heard Margaret sigh and this puzzled her. Quick was her response. "I'm not so sure of that, Megsy. You are so sweet and lovable, I know you will be stolen away from me long before I am ready to lose you." Then, as they reached the top of the

mesa, she continued happily, "Oh, how good it is to see V. M. Ranch again. This time I do hope that brother of mine will be at home to greet us. I have had so much change and recreation this past year that I actually feel guilty. It has been all work and responsibility for Malcolm."

"I have a plan to suggest," Megsy said. "Let's insist that Malcolm take a two weeks' vacation and go away somewhere so isolated that he could not possibly receive there a message about the ranch."

Virg shook her head. "I don't believe that we could persuade my brother to go," she replied.

"I'm going to try," was Margaret's quiet response.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AND THE REASON FOR IT.

THE girls entered the ranch house living room and stood looking about.

"How queer not to hear a sound," Margaret said. "Why does it seem so much more still than usual do you suppose?"

"Perhaps because we do not hear the shouting of the Mahoy children," Virg replied. "They are usually at play in the door yard at this hour. Let's go over to their home and ask Mrs. Mahoy where everyone is."

With a heart filled with an unaccountable foreboding, Virg led the way to the small adobe back of the big ranch house and nearer the dry creek.

As they approached they saw the four small children seated on the porch step huddled together. The oldest girl was softly crying, the two younger ones looked frightened, as though something had happened which they could not understand, and Patsy,

though his lips were quivering, seemed to be trying not to cry.

Virginia leaped forward, and kneeling put her arms about the sobbing girl, then, looking at the boy, she said, "Patsy, lad, what has happened? Is your mother—"

She said no more, for the door opened and the little Irish woman appeared. She had on her hat and carried a bundle. The kneeling girl sprang to her feet. "Mrs. Mahoy," she said with a new alarm in her heart, "where are you going? Has anything happened in the mine?"

The little woman nodded. "Indeed there has, Miss Virginia. It's caved in somewheres. A boy from Slater's just rode over to get you, but bein' as you wasn't here, I was starting mesilf. It's thankful I am as ye've come, for I was beside mesilf entirely not knowin' what to do wid the children. Me Pat is all right, the saints be praised, but—" she hesitated.

"Malcolm, what about Malcolm?" It was Margaret who asked the question, her eyes thought of what might have happened to her guardian.

The little Irish woman hardly knew how to reply. "The boy said as how they hadn't found him yet," she told them, "but, like as not, they have by this

time," she hastened to add. "Uncle Tex went right back with the boy an' I was goin' mesilf with liniments and bandages."

"I will take them, Mrs. Mahoy. You stay with the children." Then turning to the other girl, Virginia added: "Margaret, perhaps you would better remain at home. I'll send the Slater boy back with a message as soon as I know that all is well."

She glanced anxiously at her adopted sister. There had been a long ride already that morning and Megsy was not as strong as the other.

"I am going with you," was the quiet reply, and Virg knew that when Margaret spoke that way there was nothing more to be said.

Mrs. Mahoy had disappeared, but was quickly back in the open doorway, her hat removed. "Miss Virginia," she said, "I've put the kettle on and in a minute now I'll have a snack for you to be eatin' before yez start on the ride to the mine."

Half an hour later the girls were again in the saddle and were following the trail across Dry Creek toward Seven Peak Range. Virginia's heart was filled with self-reproach, because she had permitted Malcolm to carry more than his share of the responsibility, and yet, how could she have helped it? It had been all work and no play for him ever since

their father died. Suddenly she realized that Margaret was riding close at her side.

"Dear," Megsy said, and there was a quiver in her voice, "try not to grieve yet. Wait until we know more. I feel sure that all is well with my guardian." But was all well with the brave, strong, quiet Malcolm?

CHAPTER XXV.

AN HOUR OF SUSPENSE.

As the girls neared the Second Peak their anxiety increased. They could see men hurrying about near the mine and they urged their horses to greater speed. However, one man, chancing to look in their direction, seemed to be much concerned because of their rapid approach and, seizing a red flag, he climbed out on the over-hanging rocks and waved frantically, while another, leaping to his side, motioned the girls to stay back.

They then drew rein and Margaret exclaimed: "What can it mean, do you suppose?"

"I think they must be going to blast," Virginia replied, her face white as she shaded her eyes and gazed intently in the direction of the seemingly excited men.

"But, how can they blast if Malcolm, if anyone is buried in the mine?"

"I don't understand," Virg told her, "but I'm not

going to worry more than I can help until I know that there is really something to worry about."

"One of the men is mounting a horse now," Margaret said. "Perhaps he is coming to explain to us what is happening."

This surmise proved true, for they saw a cowboy approaching them on a racing mustang. "It's Rusty Pete from the Slater Ranch. At least our suspense will soon be over, for he will tell us what it all means."

It was very evident by the expression on the face of the cowboy that he dreaded telling the message he had been sent to convey. So pre-occupied and concerned was he that he jerked upon the reins of his mustang in a manner which his steed wrongly interpreted and the result was that it reared and plunged and arrived in the neighborhood of the girls in so nervous a state that it was with difficulty quieted long enough for the rider to speak.

"What have you to tell us, Pete?" Virginia eagerly inquired, when at last the restive horse was for a moment standing with all four feet upon the ground, although it continued to whistle and paw the sand with its right fore foot.

Rusty Pete was evidently at a loss for words to express his message. "Your brother, Miss Virginia,"

he began, "that is, they're going to blast," he hurried on as though he couldn't complete the sentence he had started, "and they sent me to say, don't come nearer, till they signal."

Virg, believing that the cowboy was about to ride away again, leaned over and put her hand on his arm. "Tell me, Pete," she implored, "what has happened to my brother?"

Before the cowboy could reply there was a flash of fire on Second Peak, an upheaval of rock and smoke, and a thundering noise that reverberated through the mountains echoing back from the far peaks, and then a shower of sand and bits of stone fell all about them. The horses, stung by the sharp edges of this unexpected fusilade, leaped and plunged, and it was sometime before they could be quieted. Excited shouts from the mine then attracted their attention. They turned to see another rider approaching them with all haste.

"It's Uncle Tex, and he has good news, I am sure," Virg exclaimed, "for see, he is waving his sombrero and shouting joyfully."

Virginia leaped to the ground and ran toward the approaching horseman, who also dismounted and took the sobbing girl in his arms.

"Uncle Tex! Uncle Tex!" she cried "Tell me, has anything happened to my brother?"

"Thar! Thar! Miss Virginia, dearie," the old man said, consolingly, though tears were trembling on his wrinkled cheeks, "something did happen to Master Malcolm, but he's all right now. We sure had to take an awful big chance blastin' that way, but we didn't durst wait to ask what you'd have us do, we just had to do it, and Heaven be praised 'twas the right thing. Master Malcolm's safe and they'll be fetchin' him along in a minute.

"You see, Miss Virginia, dearie, 'twas this a-way," the old man continued: "Master Malcolm was bent on goin' into a new tunnel along side of a vein that had just been opened. Pat Mahoy warned him as 'twasn't safe yet, bein' as the struts weren't all up, but Master Malcolm said he was in a hurry to get back to V. M., to be thar when you gurls returned, and so he took the chance. Wall, Pat Mahoy says 'twas just as he prognosticated. Master Malcolm hadn't no more'n disappeared into the new tunnel when there was a rumblin' noise as Pat knew meant trouble. He ran shouting, but though he saw Master Malcolm turn back 'twas too late. The rocks and dirt up above crushed down, shuttin' him out, but more rocks kept slidin' down and 'twasn't safe no

how. Then 'twas they took the chance to blast the big rock from the openin'. When 'twas all over, they found Master Malcolm a little way in lying white as a ghost and most smothered, seemed like, but he came to, quick enough, when he was fetched out. Howsomever it will be a long time before he gets his strength back, I'm a-thinkin'. He's all wore out anyway. I've been noticin' it for months past, but he wouldn't stop a peggin', but now I guess as he'll have to take a rest."

Virginia saw a slow moving procession leaving the mine. She again mounted her pony and rode in that direction, closely followed by the others. A wagon that was used for hauling timber had been quickly changed by the miners into an ambulance, bedding having been piled on the cross boards, and, as it neared, the girls saw Malcolm lying listless as though he were too weary to move. However, when Virginia rode up alongside, her brother smiled wanly.

"I'm all right, Sis," he said. "I tried to get buried too soon. I guess." Then with a sigh as though the exertion of speaking had been too much for him, he closed his eyes, nor did he open them again during the long, slow ride over the desert.

It was with great difficulty that the crossing of the Dry Creek was made, but, in the late afternoon

the anxious Mrs. Mahoy saw the procession slowly climbing up the sloping trail back of the ranch house. She hurried out to meet them.

"Was me Pat all right?" was her first query, and when she had received a reply in the affirmative, the little woman added: "It's bakin' I've been all the arfternoon, Miss Virginia, for I was thinkin' as thar'd be many to feed."

"Thank you for you thoughtfulness," the young mistress of V. M. said, with sincere appreciation.

Margaret assisted Mrs. Mahoy to spread the many good things on the long kitchen table that the miners who had accompanied them might have a hearty supper before their return to Second Peak.

Uncle Tex and Virginia meanwhile helped Malcolm into his own bed, and for the first time in many years the lad turned toward his sister and said: "Virgie, I'm so tired, tired clear through."

"I know you are brother, dear," Virginia said, as she knelt by his side and held his listless hand to her cheek. "I haven't mothered you as much as I should have done, but from now on you are going to just rest. I don't know yet what we're going to do, but it's going to be something different and wonderful."

CHAPTER XXVI.

MAKING PLANS.

"WHERE, Oh where shall we take my brother for a complete rest?" Virginia had softly closed the door of Malcolm's bedroom, having told that giant of a lad that he must sleep all of the afternoon.

He had laughed at the suggestion. It did indeed seem preposterous. In all of his nineteen years, he had never slept in the day-time. When his sister had left him, he determined to rise, dress and steal out of the window and down to the corral, but when he had tried to stand, he found that he was not as strong as he had supposed, and he was actually glad to lie down again, and, being truly weak and weary, he was soon asleep.

Margaret looked up from her sewing. She and Virginia were planning to cut over two of their dresses that were still pretty, but which they had outgrown. Megsy's was to be for six year old Jane Wallace, while Virg was to make one for ten year old Sari.

"Are we really going to take my guardian some-

where?" she asked eagerly, adding at once. "I do hope so, Virg! What a heavy burden of responsibility he has had since your father died. I don't know where you would find another boy, only sixteen as he was then, who would have the courage to attempt to run a big ranch and compete with men old enough to be his father." Margaret's voice had a ring of enthusiasm in which there was mingled much of admiration and perhaps something more.

But no praise of her brother seemed to the listener to be more than he deserved. Seating herself on the window seat, she took from a basket, (which had been made in the Indian village), a pretty gold brown dress. Holding it up, she asked: "Megsy, don't you think this especially suits little Sari? There's a glint of gold in that brown hair of hers and I'm not at all sure but that there is in her thoughtful eyes as well." Her companion nodded. "I'm glad I have outgrown this rose colored muslin," Margaret added. "Janey will just love it, and she'll look like a little wild rose-bud in it. I think she's the sweetest child, and Oh Virg, now since that nice Gordon Traylor helped Mr. Wallace to perfect his water locating device that forlorn family in Hog Canon won't be so poor, will they?"

But Virginia shook her head as though she were not at all sure that immediate prosperity would follow." Of course they have water now on their place, but water won't buy cattle, nor food, nor clothes. I fear that prosperity is still far removed. Unless," Virg had dropped her sewing on her lap and was gazing thoughtfully out of the window, "unless Mr. Wallace can induce some rich men to be pardners with him. Without capital, he cannot make his invention of much value to him."

"Hark, what's all the shouting?" Margaret looked up to inquire." It sounds like wild Indians let loose. Isn't it a shame, whatever it is, for it surely will waken Malcolm and we did so want him to sleep."

Virginia had leaped to the door to see who was coming. "Oh, good," she cried. "It's Babs and Betsy and Peyton no less. Of course they don't know about brother and so would not think of being quiet."

Skipping out on the wide veranda, Megsy and Virg waved to the three who were galloping down the mesa trail, but they had ceased their shouting, having correctly interpreted Virg's signal when she put her fingers to her lips.

"Is anyone sick?" Barbara inquired as she dis-

mounted and gave the mistress of V. M. a girlish hug.

The other two listened anxiously. "Yes, that is, not exactly sick, but I'll tell you all about it when you come in. There's Patsy Mahoy." The small Irish boy came on a run when Virg beckoned, and he was proud indeed when she asked him to take the three ponies to the corral. "Now we'll go in and I'll tell you what has happened. My, Betsy, you and Babs look flushed and warm. It's pretty hot riding so far in the sun. Sit down, everybody, and I'll go to our cooling cellar and bring up some nice lemonade that Megsy and I made only an hour ago, thinking that brother might like some every now and then."

"Let me get it," Margaret was on her feet as she spoke. "You can tell the story of the mine much better than I can." And so Virg took the chair her adopted sister had vacated and told to anxious listeners how, when she and Margaret had returned from the Three Cross Ranch, there had been no one at all at V. M. Then from poor frightened Mrs. Mahoy they had learned of the cave-in over at the mine.

"Oh Virg!" Babs cried in alarm. "Your brother wasn't hurt, was he?"

"No, thank heaven, not really hurt," the girl replied with fervent gratitude, "but he was buried in that smothering place for several hours. Uncle Tex thinks there must have been an air current somewhere, or Malcolm could not have lived until they blasted."

"Blasted!" Peyton repeated in surprise. "That was taking a big chance, wasn't it?"

"Yes, indeed! I shudder to think of it now, but then, when it was the only thing that could possibly save my brother, it had to be done of course."

"And you say he wasn't hurt in the least?"

"Not hurt, but he is so weak that he cannot stand alone, or rather he could not then, and now he is asleep I am sure." Then turning to the listening lad, Virginia asked, "Peyton, where would you suggest that brother be taken to have as complete a rest as he needs. I would like to go to some place where even the scenery would be different and where he couldn't see a cow or a cowboy or anything that would suggest his own occupation."

For a thoughtful moment the lad looked steadily into the questioning eyes of the girl he loved. "Virginia," he said at last, "if I were as tired as Malcolm is, I know where I would want you to take me."

If there was an emphasis on the pronoun, it was unnoticed by the others, but a sudden flush in the cheeks of Virginia and a tender light in the eyes of the lad told more than mere words could.

But when the girl spoke, it was as though her only thought had been her brother's welfare, as, indeed, it really had been.

"Once, in the days of my rambling life," it was the first time that Peyton had ever referred to the time when he had run away from home because his father was unkindly severe, "I boarded the train in Boston and went to the end of the line, so to speak, and found myself in paradise, if ever there was one on this earth of ours."

"Oh, then you must have been in California," Margaret leaned forward to exclaim. "That, of course, would be the end of the line if you were crossing the continent, for there is nothing beyond but ocean. I went there once with Mother when she was trying to get well, and Oh, how wonderful it is! I've often hoped that I might go again, although I would not want to revisit the same place, not where little Mother and I were together."

"Of course not, dear," the thoughtful Virginia had slipped an arm about her adopted sister. Then glancing again at the lad who seldom looked at any-

thing or anyone but her, she asked. "Then you think California the best place for us to take brother for a vacation and to get back his strength?"

"I do indeed. That's where I'd want to go. Hark!" the lad lifted a finger and listened. "I think I hear Malcolm calling."

"Oh yes, he must have awakened." Virginia was skipping toward the closed door at the opposite end of the long living room. "If he is awake Peyton, I will call you." Then the door opened and closed again. The lad walked to the window and looked out. How all of the brightness of the room had seemed to vanish when Virginia left it, he was thinking. Then he rebuked himself, for dearly he loved his pretty little "Dresden China" sister. He had heard the girls call her that, because she seemed so breakable and withal so exquisitely pink and blue and gold, with her fluffy sunlit curls, her eyes that were like June skies and her rose-bud complexion which the winds of the desert did not seem to want to tan. He did indeed, love her, but his love for Virginia was different, so very different! But God had planned it that way. Such love indeed was a gift from the Father of them all and was to be treated reverentially, although, who

could treat it otherwise? It was with a start that the lad whirled when he heard his name called. Virginia had returned and was standing by the table pouring lemonade into a glass. "Brother has awakened and I have propped him up on two pillows," she was saying. "Will you take this to him, Peyton, but don't tell him as yet that we are planning to take him away from his beloved ranch, for, if you do, he will declare that everything will go to pieces if he isn't here to hold it together. We've got to plan a way to make him think, that, for a time, V. M. will be better off, under different management." Virg's smile, as she handed the brimming glass to the lad, was so frank and friendly that he wondered, if, after all, it was merely comradeship that she felt for him. Well, he could wait. He had promised never again to mention his love for her until she was eighteen and she was but seventeen now. However, hard it might be, he meant to keep that promise. Of one thing he was sure. Even though Virg might not care for him in the big way yet, neither did she love any other lad. When the door had closed behind Peyton, Betsy cried. "Oh good, here comes Slim from the station and he has the Mail Bag."

CHAPTER XXVII.

UNEXPECTED NEWS.

"LETTERS!! Letters! Who wants a letter?" Betsy Clossen had skipped out to the wide veranda to receive the mail bag from the good-looking young cowboy Slim.

"I do!" "I'll take three!" Megsy and Babs cried in chorus.

"Oh Barbara, what a piggy-wig you are. Three indeed! Now, just to punish you, it's Virg who shall have the three and you only one." Betsy had poured the contents of the bag on the big library table and was looking it over. Margaret and Virginia had returned to their sewing. That latter maid found herself strangely indifferent to whether or no there would be a letter for her. This she could easily understand since, was she not at home with Uncle Tex and Malcolm, and the girls she liked best were right then in the room with her, and Peyton would not need to write her the weekly letter

she had received while she had been away at boarding school. Betsy interrupted her thoughts by saying: "I was a prophet! Here are three letters for Miss Virginia Davis. Guess, Virg, if you can, who they may be from?"

That tall slender maiden, being addressed dropped her sewing in her lap, as she replied, "I'd like to hear from dear Mrs. Martin. Is there a foreign stamp on any of them, Betsy? Our beloved principal must be in Japan, I suppose, about now, on her around the world tour."

"Nary a foreign stamp. Well, since you can't guess, I'll give them to you and when you open them up you will know who they are from."

"What a brilliant remark!" Barbara teased, but Virg having accepted the letters Betsy had handed her, attracted the attention of them all by exclaiming, "Well, if this isn't the queerest! I'm just ever so sure that the handwriting on this envelope is Winona's, but it is postmarked Red Riverton. What can she be doing up there? Ever since she wrote that she was back on the desert with that nice Indian lad, Fleet Foot, I have been hoping that she would come over to see us."

As she talked, Virginia was opening the envelope.

The first line in the letter caused her to cry joyfully, "Girls! Girls! Listen to this!"

"Dear White Lilly," the letter began. "I was married yesterday—"

"What! Winona married to Fleet Foot?" Margaret and Betsy exclaimed in excited chorus.

"I'm sure I don't know," Virg told them. "Just wait a minute and we'll find out." Her eyes went rapidly down the sheet and then turning she gave Margaret an ecstatic little hug. "Oh, what glorious news! Think of it! Our wonderful Winona has married that splendid Harry Wilson. It seems that his mother has been ill for a long time and Winona has been there as nurse ever since we came from school. That's why we haven't seen her." Then, turning a page, Virg read aloud:

"I had never even thought of marrying anyone. Of course I knew that most of all I admired Harry, but I believed that his mother would want him to marry one of his own kind, but, Virginia, can you think how great is my happiness when I tell you that his mother loves me, really loves me, and asked me to be her daughter.

"I have always been so alone, for my father, Chief Grey Hawk, and my brother, Strong Heart, were

much away, that it seems strange to me that anyone should care.

"I told Harry that much as I love him, I feared that it would be hard for me to be as domestic as his wife should be, for there are times when I feel that I am kin to the wind that sweeps over the desert or to the bird that flies where it will. Then it was that Harry told me his own good news. He has received an appointment as state geologist and we are soon to start on horseback (our honeymoon we call it) and travel all over Arizona that he may obtain specimens of rock to send to Smithsonian Institute.

"We would not go were it not that Mrs. Wilson is rapidly regaining her strength and that her recently widowed sister in the East is coming to keep house, and to make this her home.

"I am sorry not to see my school-mates before we depart, but that cannot be, as we leave on horseback at dawn tomorrow and journey north."

There were tears in the eyes of Virginia as she lifted them from the letter to look at her friends.

"How happy they are going to be," she said, "I am glad for them both."

"We were wondering who among us would be

the first bride," Betsy remarked. "We little thought, did we, that it would be Winona?"

Betsy Clossen had recognized her aunt's handwriting on one of her letters and so when Margaret asked which was to be read next, that maiden eagerly announced, "Mine, please, for I do want to know what Aunt Laura has to say. If the quarantine has been lifted, she will want me to be coming home, and, although I have had the most wonderful time here on the desert, and I am endlessly grateful to you, Virginia, for having invited me, for you saved me from a most desolate month all alone in school, still, of course, if the twins have recovered, I do want to spend part of my vacation at my mother-aunt's Cape Cod home."

"I know dear," Virginia replied, as she clasped her friend's hand. "Although other places may be interesting, there is no place quite like the one that shelters our own home people. Read your letter and tell us about it."

The missive did not take long to read.

"Darling girl," it began. "I rejoice to be able to tell you that the quarantine has been lifted and that the twins are wild to see their best loved cousin Bettykins, and, as for me, my heart is yearning for

my sister's motherless little daughter, so come, dear, just as soon as the fastest train bound for the East can bring you to three people who so dearly love you.

"One of them being, Your AUNT LAURA."

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," Betsy told them. "I'm so glad somebody loves me that way. Mother and Aunt Laura were twins, and she seems more like a mother to me than my other two aunts, although, they, too, are nice." Then putting her arms impulsively about her hostess, she exclaimed, "Virginia, how can I thank you for having been so kind, and you, too, Margaret." She reached out and clasped the hand of her other friend. Then she asked eagerly: "Virg, shall you mind if I begin to pack at once and take the next train East?"

"Of course not, dear, I know just how you feel and we will help you, but if you really take the next train, we will all have to rush to get you ready."

"My letters can wait," Margaret said unselfishly. "They are from members of our Lucky Thirteen Club, and although I know that they will be filled with jolly news items, they will be just as interesting later."

As Megsy spoke, she placed her unopened letters between the pages of a magazine on the table for safe keeping and then she joined the other girls who were already opening Betsy's trunk, preparing to pack.

That maiden had skipped to Malcolm's room to tell him the news, but she had found him asleep and, knowing that rest was one thing required to restore his strength, she had tiptoed out. Three hours later, she went again to his door, this time her hat and coat on.

The lad had been informed by his sister of Betsy's sudden and unexpected departure and was prepared to say goodbye.

"Miss Clossen," he said as he held out his hand, "I hear that you are a wonderful detective, and so, if we ever have need of your services, may we send for you?"

Betsy laughed. "Indeed yes, and don't forget," she replied, "for I know that I will be just as wild to come back as I am now to go home to Aunt Laura and the twins."

Another three hours had passed and Margaret and Virginia were again in the living room having escorted Betsy to Silver Creek Junction, where the train, being on time, had borne her away.

"Well," Virginia remarked as she sank down in a big easy chair, "what a whirl of a day we have had. I am almost dizzy-tired. First there was that exciting news about Winona's marriage and then for the last six hours we have rushed madly to get that dear girl started for the place that is home to her. Now the next thing for us to do is to decide where we shall take Malcolm for a complete rest."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A PLACE TO GO.

"I LIKE Peyton's suggestion that we go to California. I wish he had been able to stay longer and tell us more about what he saw when he was there. He might recall just the very place for us to take Malcolm," Megsy said.

"I invited them to remain all night," Virg remarked as she took up her sewing, "but Peyton thinks, now that his trusted overseer, Trujillo, has gone back to Mexico, that he had better not leave his ranch long at a time until he has another equally dependable." The two of whom they were speaking had ridden back to "Three Cross" when Margaret and Virginia had accompanied Betsy to the station at Silver Creek.

"What did I do with my letters, Virg?" Margaret had suddenly recalled that she had not opened her mail. "I put them into something for safe keeping. Oh yes, here they are! Why, I declare. One of them is for you."

"Oho, this is great! It's from Eleanor Pettes! I was hoping to hear from her soon. She told me when she came to our closing exercises at Vine Haven that she had written a story which she believed to be the very best thing she had ever done and she was actually going to send it to a real magazine. I suppose by now she has heard from it. How I do hope that it was accepted."

"Eleanor writes so exceptionally well and had so much experience editing the school magazine before she went to college prep that I am sure, in time, she is bound to succeed," Margaret was remarking when her companion, having opened the letter, uttered a little squeal of delight.

"What is it, Virg? Has Eleanor sold her story? I am sure by the way your eyes are shining that there must be good news."

Virginia had continued to silently read down the first page, then she looked up, her face aglow. "Good? It's glorious! Just wait until you hear." Then she read aloud from the delicately scented missive:

"Dear Kindred Spirit,

"If I were not afraid of falling from the literary pedestal upon which I know that you two girls have

placed me, I would begin this letter with some expressive school girl slang. 'Gee whiliker, but it's corking good news.' But since Betsy Clossen can use that more naturally than I can, I'll simply say that I am amazed beyond comprehending what this wonderful thing is which has happened. I find myself rubbing my eyes and pinching myself as did Alice in Wonderland. 'Can it be really true?' I ask myself a dozen times a day. Then, fearing it to be but a dream, or a plot that I have planned for a story, I go again to my desk and take the letter therefrom and re-read what it has to say on the subject. You never could guess what it is, no one could. I couldn't myself if I didn't know, so I will have to tell you.

"I have inherited Something. I just had to start that with a capital letter, for the inheritance surely deserves it. In fact it ought to be all capital letters. Have I sufficiently aroused your curiosity? Well, then, harken and you shall hear.

"A great-aunt of my Dad's (goodness knows how old she was, I don't), has left me her estate. Think of that, Virginia, if you can grasp a thing so stupendous. I'll agree it's very hard to believe all at once and sudden like. This same estate, it seems, is located in the Garden of Eden, not figur-

atively, but really true. The name of the place, however, on the railroad map (I don't suppose it's big enough to be on a school geography), is San Ceritos and it's in California, that Paradise-on-earth that you and I have heard so much about. When I say that I am wild to behold it with my own eyes, I only faintly describe my feelings. Think of it, Virg, you who love nature as much as I do, this estate of mine has mountains to shelter it at the back and it's wooded acres slope down to the sea. Dad says that the water in that sheltered cove is at times as blue as the Mediterranean, and I own it; or, that is, I own half of it, but the mysterious part of all this is that I don't know who owns the other half and I haven't any way of finding out. The will is the queerest!

"Dad says that his Great-Aunt Myra was always called eccentric by everyone who knew her. It seems that when she was a young girl she was engaged, but on the very eve of her wedding day something happened. Dad doesn't know what, but his Great-Aunt Myra never married.

"Dad's parents came East when he was a little fellow, and, although he heard now and then of this aunt who had shut herself up in her mountain and sea-encircled home, neither he, nor any of the kin

that he knew of, had really corresponded with her. She didn't even know of my existence until last year and it was just the merest chance that she learned of it even then. It happened this way: You remember last winter in school when we girls had such a fad for looking up our family trees. Well, when I came home for the holidays, I asked Dad to tell me about every Pettes he could think of. It was a stormy night and we sat in the cosy library by the fireplace and I wrote down on a pad all the names and addresses he could recall. At last he came to this great-aunt. He just happened to think of her, and, girls, what if he hadn't? I decided to write to each of these relatives, and, since Aunt Myra was the oldest living branch on the family tree, out of courtesy I began with her and sent her my picture, the one I had taken last May Day at school. I didn't hear a word in reply, I wasn't even sure that she had received it, until last week a legal-looking envelope arrived addressed to me. It contained the startling information I have just imparted.

"Well, as I said before, the will of my Dad's Great-Aunt Myra is surely the queerest. One might think that the dear old lady was *non compos mentos*, but no, her attorney and servants report

that up to the last her mind was sane and sound. Of course, I am glad, for, if she had not been mentally all right, the will, queer as it is, would have been null and void, and your Kindred Spirit would not be writing this thrilling epistle to tell you of her almost incomprehensible inheritance.

"The will, of course, is couched in high-sounding legal terms, and so I'll just tell you the gist of it.

" 'I, Myra Pettes, do hereby will and bequeath one-half of my estate, located between the Sierra Padre Mountains and the sea, to Eleanor Pettes, the daughter of my grand-nephew, Oris Pettes, on condition that she never opens the locked door of the upper front room until she has found Hugh Ward, to whom I will and bequeath the other half of my estate. When he has been found, they are to enter the room together.'

"Did you ever hear of anything like that outside of a story-book? Of course, *in* a story queer things are to be expected, but in the humdrum life of a school girl one doesn't anticipate occurrences so mysterious and exciting.

"Hugh Ward! Who in the world do you suppose he is? Dad says he never heard the name before, and even Great-Aunt Myra's attorney reports

that he has no knowledge whatever of the man, young or old. They have advertised in every paper in the country, but have had no reply. I suppose he is some very old gentleman whom my Aunt Myra knew when she was young. Perhaps we ought to hunt for him in a 'home for the aged and infirm.'

"Well, be that as it may, I am supposed to go West and occupy my new possession; that is, all but the locked front room, and, since the housekeeper, in sending a description of the place, informs me that there are twenty rooms, ten of them being sleeping apartments, I presume I will be able to get along without entering the one that is locked. I don't see how one lone-maiden can occupy ten bedrooms. Dad is obliged to go to Europe this month.

"Now harken and hear something which I think thrilling. Dad says I may invite you and Margaret and Babs and the brothers I have heard you tell about, Peyton and Malcolm, to accompany me when I visit my new estate. I'm to have the use of Dad's private car. For once I'm glad he is a high-up railway official, and I'll telegraph you at what hour we will side-track at Douglas. If you can accept, be there bag and baggage. I'm so excited I can hardly keep my feet on earth. Sometimes I feel as though

I were going to spin away up in the air. Good-bye for now. I'll telegraph tomorrow.

"Your K. S.

"ELEANOR."

Virginia looked up with glowing eyes. "It sounds like magic, doesn't it?" she inquired. "We wish for a place to go, in fact, we were wishing that we might go to this very California, and here is a letter inviting us to do so."

Margaret was equally delighted and excited. "It's perfectly wonderful," she agreed. "But, Virg, I didn't suppose that dignified girl could be so, well, girlishly jubilant about anything. Maybe because she was a senior at school, I always thought she was unusually mature, I mean."

"News like this is enough to make any one act hilarious," Virg declared. "Moreover, although Eleanor has a dignified carriage, I know that she is very enthusiastic about ever so many things."

"Of course, you know her much better than I do," Megsy agreed, "since it was she who showed you how to edit the school magazine, and, of course, you had an opportunity to get better acquainted, as you spent hours together. I don't wonder that Eleanor calls you 'Kindred Spirit.' I al-

ways did think that Winona and Eleanor were more mental companions for you than any of the rest of us. Don't think I'm jealous, Virg. Honestly, I am not. I am glad that you do love them, and even more glad that I have something no one can take from me, and that is the great happiness of being your adopted sister." Then rising, Megsy held out her hand as she said, "If Malcolm is awake, let's read the letter to him and then tell him our plan."

Silently Virginia rose and tenderly she kissed the quiet Margaret. "I do love you, little sister, and you occupy a place in my heart that no one else shall ever have." Then with arms about each other, they went softly toward the closed door.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MALCOLM'S DECISION.

MALCOLM listened to the enthusiastic chatter of the two girls, who, having read Eleanor's letter to him were each trying to outdo the other in thinking up arguments that might persuade the lad that accepting the invitation was the very best thing that he could do and just what he should do to regain his strength.

"But who will conduct the V. M. Ranch? Tell me that," the lad protested.

"Uncle Tex was overseer whenever Dad went away, and if our father could trust his judgment, surely we can."

"Righto, and, with such able helpers as Slim and Lucky, I really have nothing to fear on that score, and yet, of course, they might need my advice now and then. Did your friend, Eleanor, mention a town from which one could telegraph?"

"Why, no, she didn't, but of course there are

towns everywhere. However, that is the one thing we want to get you away from, a long distance telephone or any other method of easy communication, for every day you would be wanting to call up and find out if V. M. were all right."

Then, as Malcolm still hesitated, Virg hastened on to say, "Of course, I didn't know that we might go to California, as I only just now received this letter, but I *did* know that we wanted to go *somewhere*, and so, yesterday, I talked it all over with dear old Uncle Tex and he agrees with me that it is your duty to all of us to go where you can rest and when I said, 'You could take charge of V. M. just as you used to do for Dad, couldn't you?' Well, Malcolm, I wish you could have seen that dear old man's face. Glowing doesn't describe it. 'Miss Virginie, dearie, Ah'd take it as powerful complimentin' if Malcolm'd trust me, Ah sure would, an Lucky an' Slim'd stand by me, that's sartin', was what he said, and his voice trembled, brother, honestly it did."

"I know how he feels," the lad declared earnestly. "Uncle Tex has felt much like an old horse may, one that we feel has outlived its usefulness and is given pasturage for the rest of its life. Dad told us that he once had a horse like that. He thought it had

served him long enough, and so he did not permit any of the boys to ride it, but after a time, he noticed that the old horse used to come up to the bars when it's companions were being saddled and actually looked wistful, as though it were being left out. Then came the day of the great stampede. You've heard Father tell about it time and again, Virg, how the boys were all away helping Mr. Slater with his roundup, and only old Peter left in the fenced-in pasture. The boys had cut out our cattle and had started them for home, Dad says, when all of a sudden he heard a noise that sounded like distant thunder. As it neared, he knew it to be the pounding of hoofs; then he could hear the bellowing of frightened cattle. He was alone on the ranch and the only horse nearby was old Peter.

"Dad ran to the rise of ground above the dry creek and saw that the madened herd was swerving toward the north and might be lost in that waterless part of the desert called 'The Burning Acres.' While he was wondering what could be done to stop them, he heard a shrill whistling neigh from old Peter. Dad turned in time to see that horse race across the small pasture and leap that high-barred fence, nor did it stop, but kept on galloping as it had in its younger days, directly toward the mass of surging cattle. Dad

said he was sure the old horse would be trampled to death. Many a time, in years gone by, he himself had ridden Peter when he wanted to turn cattle back, and now, though riderless, the old horse seemed bent on doing that very thing. Dad said he held his breath, but the unexpected happened. The cattle, not knowing what to make of the horse that was hurling itself at them, did swerve, and then, to Dad's great joy, they descended into dry creek where, since they could not run, they were soon under the control of the cowboys who came riding on ponies that were covered with lather."

"What of old Peter?" Megsy inquired. "Did he die then from exhaustion?"

"Indeed not!" Malcolm told her. "And never again was he treated as though his days of usefulness were all over. Dad himself rode him, not on hard rides, to be sure, but whenever he was just going to the station or to visit with a neighbor, and, after that, the old horse seemed much more content." Then turning to his sister, the lad said, "I recalled that story when you told me how almost wistfully eager Uncle Tex was to be once more trusted as overseer of the place. And he shall be, too. Dear faithful old man."

"Then you will go with us? You will let us take

you to this wonderful San Ceritos?" the two girls cried at once.

Laughingly the lad held out a hand to each of them. "Damsels fair," he said, "take me wherever you wish, but now please depart. I wish to lay my plans."

Then Margaret accused, "Malcolm, there are twinkles in your eyes. I do believe that you are amused at something."

The lad, who still held the hand of his ward, turned and looked at her, then he smiled again as though he were pleased with what he saw, as indeed he well might be, for Margaret had been so excited that her cheeks were flushed and as pink as roses, while her dreamy brown eyes were shining like stars. Then, as the lad continued to gaze at her, the color deepened, and, withdrawing her hand, she said mischievously, "Virginia, perhaps we better go, since Malcolm has just told us that he prefers his own thoughts to our company."

"I've changed my mind," the lad declared. "I'd rather have you stay."

Virginia, who for the last few moments had been busy in another part of the room, turned suddenly and looked intently at her brother as though she were surprised about something. He was usually so seri-

ous, so occupied with business that she had forgotten that he could tease. Then her face brightened, and stooping, she kissed him lightly on the forehead. "You are much better, dear, aren't you?" she said, then taking her friend by the arm, she continued, "Come, Megsy, let's hie us to our rooms and select the wardrobe we are to take with us. Eleanor's telegram may come tomorrow and we will then have not more than three days to prepare for the journey."

CHAPTER XXX.

A SCARE

LATE that afternoon the two girls went out to feed the hens and then, as was often their custom, they climbed the trail to the mesa that they might watch the sunset. On their return, Margaret gathered a few late desert flowers to place on the table beside Malcolm's bed. It was still daylight when they returned and Megsy went at once to the closed door and tapped thereon. There was no response. What could it mean? Even if Malcolm had fallen asleep, the rapping would have awakened him. Beckoning to Virginia, she whispered anxiously, "Oh, Virg, what can have happened? Your brother can't have lost consciousness, could he?"

There was a sudden terror in the heart of Virginia. Leaping forward, she turned the knob, but the door was locked. Before they could be thoroughly frightened, however, they heard a merry laugh, and there stood Malcolm back of them. He had on

his nice wooly bathrobe that the girls had given him for Christmas and his comfortable slippers.

"You see," he apologized, "I've never had an opportunity to wear them before, because this is the first time I've ever been even near sick, so please don't scold, and I *did* want to get up and have supper with you girls. It seems to me that I've been in bed for weeks."

"One, only, to be accurate," his sister corrected. "Malcolm, you sit down in this easy chair at once and let me feel your pulse."

"Very well, nurse," the lad smilingly complied. In fact he was glad to sink into the big comfortable chair, which was drawn close to the hearth. He wasn't as strong as he had expected to be. Virginia brought a knitted blanket to put over his knees while Margaret put sofa pillows back and around him.

"If I'm treated this way," he beamed, "I'm not at all sure that I'll want to get well."

"Let's have our supper in here by the fire," Virginia suggested.

"Oh yes, let's," Megsy seconded. "Now, what ought our patient to eat? Bring me a pencil and paper and I'll write my order." There was again that merry twinkle in the eyes that were often so serious.

Margaret skipped to the big writing desk and re-

turned with the requested materials. "And while you think about it, Virg and I will prepare for the feast." They brought Virginia's work table from her room and spread it with a dainty lunch cloth and put Margaret's red blossoms in the center. "I don't see what Malcolm can be writing," Virginia said. "He ought only to have eggs on toast or something like that." But when a moment later she looked at the paper which the lad gaily presented, she said, "Why Malcolm Davis, you've ordered everything that you ought not to have. Creamed oysters, of all things!"

"Perhaps they wouldn't hurt him," interceded Margaret. "And you know the thing you have a hankering for is supposed to be what you need." Then clapping her hands girlishly, she exclaimed, "Oh Virg, please say that we may have them. I'll get the chafing dish out of my trunk. You know what fun we had in school with it. Then you get two cans of oysters, the milk, butter and seasoning, and we can prepare it all right here on the table. Wouldn't that be jolly?"

Virginia agreed that it would. Then she prepared the toast while Margaret, flushed and happy because she could do something for her beloved guardian, stirred up the cream sauce and dropped in the oysters. Malcolm, leaning back in solid comfort, watched and

admired. At last he commented, "Did ever a chap in all the world have two such sisters to take care of him!"

There was a sudden twinge in the heart of Margaret. What could it mean? Surely she was glad, glad to have the splendid Malcolm call her "sister." There was a note of tender wistfulness in her voice, which she herself did not know when she replied, "We would do anything, give up anything, Oh, it doesn't matter what, if it would add to your happiness, Brother Malcolm." Almost unconsciously the girl was thinking of the time that would surely come when someone, perhaps now unknown to them, would take in his life a place closer than that of sister.

"Toast's ready! How about the creamed oysters?" Virginia looked up from the hearth where she had been kneeling.

"It's done to a turn." Megsy's voice was merry once more. Then Virg put the buttered slices of toast on each plate, and Margaret placed dainty portions of the creamed oysters on them.

Malcolm ate with greater relish than he had since he had been ill or rather exhausted, for he had no definite malady, just extreme weariness. When he asked for a second portion, he pretended to look im-

ploringly at Virginia as though he feared she would say, "You have had sufficient for tonight." And, indeed, maybe she might have said something of the kind, but Margaret was refilling his plate and it was too late to protest.

When the dainty little meal was over and the small table had been carried away, Malcolm smiled contentedly at the two girls, who sank into nearby chairs, the light from the fire falling on their faces. For a time they were silent, each thinking his or her own thoughts. At last Malcolm said, "Virg, are they worth the proverbial penny?"

The girl looked up brightly. "I was wondering how we are to convey Eleanor's invitation to Babs and Peyton," she replied. "I do hope that they can accompany us."

CHAPTER XXXI.

DAWN THOUGHTS.

THE next morning before daylight Margaret was conscious that someone was stirring in the room next to hers. Becoming more fully awake, she rose, drew on her kimona and slippers and tiptoed to the door which stood open between the bedrooms of the two girls.

In the dim grey light she saw Virginia dressing. She was donning her riding khakis.

"Why, Virg!" Megsy exclaimed in surprise, "where away so early? You aren't going to ride to the Three Cross Ranch, are you, to tell Babs and Peyton about the invitation?"

"Not this morning, dear. I want to wait until we receive the telegram from Eleanor that I may be more definite in what I have to tell them."

"Then, where are you going? I might guess the Papago Village, only I know that Winona is not there."

Virginia smiled brightly. "It's an odd fancy, this of mine," she confessed, "but last night I had a dream; one of those wonderfully realistic dreams when you feel sure that you are awake and that the something is actually happening. I dreamed that you and I had ridden over to Hog Canon to see the Wallace family. You know, Megsy, my conscience has troubled me because, after our first visit, I never went again and that was at least three weeks ago. Mrs. Wallace and the children have so little to interest them that even a visit from their neighbors seems like a treat."

Megsy, seated on the edge of the bed, remarked, "I don't believe they feel that way about neighbors in general, but just about Virginia Davis in particular."

The girl, who was lacing her high riding boots, looked up with a smile. "My friends spoil me, don't they, Megsy. It's well that I know myself as I am not as they try to picture me. While I'm gone, will you take good care of my brother? I want him to stay in bed all morning, though you may have Sing Long make him some nice broth at ten if you will. However, I expect to be back long before that."

Virginia had not asked her friend to accompany her and Margaret, though she had thought of re-

questing to be allowed do so, believed that for some reason Virg wished to be alone, nor was she wrong.

It was still the grey of early dawn when the girl ran down the trail leading to the small pasture where the ponies remained at night. Some of them were lying down and others were tugging at an enclosed haystack which was kept filled with the long desert grass that grew in the valley pasture, a mile from the house. But one among them whinnied as the girl approached and, kicking up frolicsome heels, he cantered to the bars, knowing well that his mistress was about to let them down. And he was right.

"Good morning, Comrade," Virginia said as she smoothed his nose affectionately. "Would you like to take me for a ride this morning?"

Again the pony whinnied. "Of course, I knew you would, and if you won't tell, I'll tell you a secret. I wanted to be all alone just once more before I go away. There's something I want to think about. It doesn't have to be decided just yet; not until I'm nearer eighteen, but I do want to be thinking about it."

Then kissing the flipping ear of her apparently interested companion, the girl started on a light run to the shed near the great windmill where the sad-

dles hung. Comrade, with colt-like antics, followed. It was evident that he was trying to express the joy that he, too, felt at being the only companion his loved mistress desired.

They had crossed the dry creek bed and had climbed up on the high opposite bank before a flush of rose appeared in the eastern skies. Virginia drew rein and sat for one long silent moment watching the loveliness of the dawning day. A fleecy white cloud near the horizon became opalescent with first one exquisitely delicate color and then another. Then with a burst of glory, the sun rose in sheets of flaming gold and the desert, which had been like a gloomy waste of desolation but a moment before, was transformed to a wide billowing expanse of shimmering silvery-grey.

Jack rabbits fearlessly gamboled about the girl and pony; birds sang and a wren darted from its nest in the top of a choya cactus to contentedly return again to its wee young when it knew that the one who was passing by was a friend of all things that live.

The trail dipped into a hollow where mesquite grass grew. Instantly there was a whirring rush of wings and a flock of quail soared high into the air, to whirl, a moment later, and settle back to

their former feeding place. It made the heart of the girl rejoice because her wild neighbors seemed to know that she was one of them.

"We're all kin folks, somehow, though we can't understand, and why try, since the sages of all time have not yet been able to tell how a wee seed can fashion a flower. After all, Comrade, if we're just kind to every form of life we meet on this wonderful earth, I think we will have done the best we know."

There was a long stretch of sand to be crossed before the Seven Peak Range would be reached and the girl, watching the trail ahead, gradually became unconscious of all about her and was once again on the rock in the moonlight with the lad who loved her at her side.

"I might think that I care enough to marry Peyton," she was thinking, "but would it be quite fair to others? There are Barbara, and Malcolm and Margaret to consider. I just couldn't leave my wonderful brother all alone on V. M. My adopted sister I might take to Three Cross with me, if I went to live there, but Malcolm—I just can't leave him! First he lost the mother whom he so idolized, and then our father, and never did a boy have a closer pal than Dad was, and now if I go, he will lose his only sister and be so lonely and so all alone. I only wish

he might meet some nice girl for whom he could care as Peyton cares for me, but he does not seem to feel the need of love; I mean, not that way."

Then it was that another thought suggested. "Perhaps it is just because he has you that he has not thought of bringing another mistress to V. M. Perhaps he would care for someone, if he knew you were going away."

Suddenly there was a rush of tears in the violet eyes, and impulsively leaning her cheek against her pony's head, Virginia said with a little half sob, "Oh Comrade, I don't believe after all that I really care for Peyton as much as I should, for I can't bear the thought of leaving my very own home where Mother and Dad were so happy and where I have been so loved. I can't think of any other girl I would want there, but just Margaret, and, of course, she would want to go with me."

Then looking up with a smile that flashed through the tears she held out her arms to the shining sky. "Little Mother," she said softly, as though she were really addressing someone, "I am forgetting that you told me to let my life blossom as quietly and trustingly as a flower unfolds, knowing that the right thing will come at the right time." Then again the girl ruminated, "How topsy-turvy would

be this universe of ours if the flowers said to themselves, 'Dear me, I wonder now if I'd better open up my petals to the sun; no telling how soon clouds may come and my bloom spoiled in a storm.'

"Comrade, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to trust, and let my life blossom as it will. What would Brother Malcolm think if he knew that I am trying to marry him to someone whom as yet he doesn't know?" Then as the canon trail had been reached, Virg turned her pony's head that way and slowly began the ascent.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS.

It was Peter Wallace who first saw the approaching visitor. Instantly his joyful shout rang out, "Ma! Ma! Here she is! Here's Miss Virgie just as you were a-wishing."

So, after all, Mrs. Wallace had been wanting to see the girl and, with a panicky feeling in her heart, she hoped that nothing was seriously wrong. "What if someone were ill or—" She had no time for further surmizing, for Comrade, having reached the top of the trail, made it possible for her to see the little house overhung with sheltering rocks. What she saw amazed her more than anything she had fancied.

Trunks stood packed and strapped on the small front porch. The house had evidently been closed for an indefinite period as there were wooden blinds at the windows barred across, and the entire family was arrayed as for a journey. Mr. Wallace at the moment was busily boarding up the front door.

Had the water supply ceased? Were they being forced to leave and where could they be going? But it was evident by the shining face of the little mother that the something that had happened must be of a pleasant nature. "Oh, Miss Virginia," she was hurrying forward with hands outstretched as soon as the girl had dismounted, "how I did want to see you before we left, but I just couldn't think of a way. I believe I sent you messages all day yesterday to say goodbye. Did you get any of them?"

"I did indeed, Mrs. Wallace. That's why I came," the girl replied, glad indeed that she had followed her intuitive guiding. Then, as her roving eyes seemed to be asking a question, the mother hurried on to answer it. "You wonder where we are going. It's almost like an answer to prayer. In fact, I think it *is* an answer, and a fulfilment of Dad's faith. We're going to Douglas to live where the children can get a schooling."

"I am going to Yale," freckled-faced Peter put in excitedly.

"Ssh! Sonny, you mustn't be telling that around, or folks will think you're a bit queer. Little boys don't go to Yale, and you'll have to study powerfully hard and be extra smart to ever get there, won't he, Miss Virginia?"

"I believe he'll make it." The girl had placed a loving hand on the hair that was sunburnt, for the boy's expression had been suddenly crestfallen. "Keep it always as your goal, Peter, and before many years you'll be writing me a letter telling me that you're on your way to that great Eastern college." Then to the mother, "Now, please begin at the beginning and tell me what has happened? Did the water give out?"

It was Mr. Wallace who replied as he advanced with a hand outstretched. "Indeed it did not and it's the water that has brought us our wonderful good luck, or rather, the instrument, I suppose."

Virginia's expressive face encouraged the speaker to continue, which he did. "You recall that fine lad who camped down at the entrance to the canon, the one who came up here with you?"

"Yes, indeed the Traylors. I have been hoping we'd hear more about both of them. Have you seen them again?"

"Well, not exactly seen them, but Mr. Traylor sent a legal representative to see me. He said that, because of his son's glowing descriptions of my invention, he wanted to back me financially in having it patented. He also offered me a splendid position in connection with his smelting founderies in

Douglas and Bisbee. It seems that for some time he has been trying to perfect some labor-saving devices and he believes, and so do I, that it can be done."

"And it isn't something we're taking on chance either," Mrs. Wallace hastened to explain. "Dad, of course, is pretty much of a dreamer but this is a sure income for five years with a signed contract backing it."

At this point, Peter, who had evidently been watching from a peak higher up, flew down to the group crying excitedly, "It's coming, Ma! Mr. Slater's truck that's to take us to town."

"Well, I don't know when I have heard more wonderful news," the visiting girl declared. "I won't say goodbye, for, after all, you are still to remain one of my neighbors. Douglas, being only twenty miles away, with a good road between it and V. M., is almost nearer via our auto, then it is to Hog Canon on horseback."

Then she shook hands with the grown-ups, kissed the children, who clung to her, left a bundle with Sari and another with Jane, telling Peter that his would come later, and rode away.

"Don't open them yet," the mother said. "I know what's in them. Miss Virgie told me. They are

pretty dresses that she and her friend have made for you girlies. They'll be just what you need for starting in school. Goodness, where is your Dad?"

"There he is, high up where the spring is. Now, he's coming. Hurry Pop! Mr. Slater's cowboys are coming up the trail to pack our trunks down."

The man's eyes glowed, but he spoke no word. Silently he reached out his hand and clasped that of his faithful little wife, and she understood.

THE END.





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